Landscape with Figures

Ronald Fraser

LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES

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By RONALD FRASER

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PREFACE

THIS book is only an attempt to reproduce, in words, experiences that have come in contemplating the landscapes, flowers and figures in Chinese pictures and on their porcelain. It is the story of a human mind that follows the mysterious and half-wanton beckonings of such an experience until it is seized and understood. The originals of my three Chinese friends are to be seen in the print-room, the ceramic-room, and the Asiatic galleries of the British Museum. I am not attempting to convey any profound meaning, unless it be the meaning of that mystical proverb, "Everything comes to him who waits." The system of thought that I attempt to reproduce is Chinese and very ancient. I have not been able to make up my own mind whether it contains something of general value, or whether it is merely a thought-puzzle with which those who find pleasure in such occupations may amuse themselves.

LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES

I

We take this flower-filled and graceful story of a summer visit to a valley of the Far East from the diaries and minutes of Ambrose Herbert. It grows from his leaves like an image of some choice, cultivated flower, some Asiatic lake-lily; there is, indeed, a delicate lily-smell, a faint water-smell, that teases the sense with a hint of queer landscapes, alien, impenetrable faces, in an unreal world of paradoxical dreams.

Yet they visited the real heart of that image, these seven men who called themselves, in a vein of humour, the Seven Sages, and it appears that they scarcely held their own, when it came to philosophy, with the uncompromising practitioners of wisdom they found there. After all, they were Europeans. Men of considerable sensibility, they yet did not give the things of the spirit undue attention; still less did they permit any vision of the universe they might have had to interfere with their way of life. They lived by common-sense adjust-

ment to the more obvious in circumstances, occasionally, at sentimental moments, following a chance gleam—but not following it too far. Five of them, that is. The other two had gone wrong.

All seven were associated in business—Lord Sombrewater's business—and he was their president. They travelled in his steam-yacht. In England it was their custom to dine once a week at Lord Sombrewater's house or in his bamboo garden, to hear a little music perhaps, drink wine (except one of them), discuss life and the world. Now the industrial world was seething at this time, and Lord Sombrewater had seemed to retire his forces, leaving a picket here, an outpost there, a strong point where necessary, well held. He had withdrawn into the quiet of the ocean to mature plans, taking with him these friends and chief lieutenants, who had each something to contribute. Much business was done daily by wireless. He kept touch with reluctant Governments, and controlled his generals in charge on the field, with relentless hand. Ambrose remarks that a wise captain-general of industry will not omit to remember that the good faith of a deputy may fail, and he is certain that Lord Sombrewater, a silent man, harboured during his silences considerations of that order even in regard to his six friends.

Ambrose Herbert was annalist and minute-writer to the Sages. He was not himself a Sage. He recorded the sagacity of others, fitted for this exercise by the passionless receptivity of his mind. Every morning,

every hour, he swept his mind clean, so that he might receive unprejudiced the impressions of the day, and no doubt that is why the lineaments of the people in his records, and the scenery, are so clear. It came to his ears that this passivity was looked on doubtfully in a man not yet senile, not yet even middle-aged, hardly mature ; it was complained that he had no character, except in his being characterless ; it was thought unfortunate. But Lord Sombrewater thought otherwise.

2

THE first time we see them they are in far eastern seas. Lychnis, who is Lord Sombrewater's daughter, Ruby Frew-Gaff and her father (the tall, polished Sir Richard, with pale blue eyes, Lord Sombrewater's chief physicist) are in the motor-launch with the light-bearded and bard-like Terence Fitzgerald and Ambrose himself. Something had gone wrong with the pelagic trawls that they used for capturing plants out of the ocean. It seems to them a rather strange and other-worldly ocean, like a sea in a picture, or on a vase. It is afternoon. There is a magical warm scent in the wind, as if they were near some land of delicate spring. Terence, the poet-painter-seer, is riding in the bows, but his soul is afloat. Sir Richard is busy with the apparatus, and the two girls, who have stolen a forbidden plunge in the sea, are clinging to the sides of the launch like wet sea-snails. The ship, into which the Sages have committed the weight of their philosophy, the *Floating Leaf*, painted the colour of the bamboo, heaves gently a quarter of a mile off on waves of a dark liquid green, which is compared with the green of some claret glasses they used, and as the afternoon wears on the sky becomes the same colour.

Ambrose, as usual, takes occasion to note some details. He mentions the longitude, the latitude, the depth, and the temperature at various levels as registered by the deep-sea thermometer. In addition, he mentions some details with regard to the two girls ; for instance, that their arms and legs (bloodless, because of the cold) make changing lights with their wet, plum-coloured bodies, and the patterns move rhythmically. There is no doubt which of the two he prefers. At least, whenever he describes them he gives Lychnis more space, possibly because she is far more complex in her nature and difficult to describe. He finds a key to the two girls in all their features. Ruby is red-haired, well-developed and dimpled. Her mouth is described as full and red, and (for those who have desires that way) of the kind which, more than any other that he has seen, Ambrose supposes might be thought kissable—that is to say, for an upstanding and not too subtle lover. Lychnis is called, amongst other things, flower-like or spritish. He speaks of a flower-like face, with some trace on it of spritish and faery passion. Her mouth seems to arouse thoughts of a non-sensual order—in himself, that is, for he records a remark of the Sage Quentin that to kiss Lychnis on the lips would be to find heaven through the flames of sensation. But Ambrose asks, would a man want to maul the body of a primrose with his mouth ? In writing of the afternoon under description, he takes opportunity to point out a relation between their minds and their physique. Ruby, with

reddish hair and fine shining body, travels tirelessly in the sea like some fabulous, ocean-going fish, and she is not variable in her moods; but Lychnis slithers and plays in the fields of the sea fawn-like, and then she is to be seen at rest considering the waters, or grimacing behind a wave.

Presently Sir Richard, discovering where they were, commanded them with tones of displeasure into the boat. Ruby, who had only done what her friend ordered, obeyed, and Lychnis, stopping first to nose under the stern as if she were a whale, followed.

"This is really not very sensible," he said, with an eye on their vascular systems. "Down below at once and get dressed."

Lychnis stood on the deck for a moment consulting her inward heart. With her it was not a question of obeying or not obeying. In all matters she followed some secret and rhythmic way that unfolded itself to her at a suitable time. Ambrose transfers a sketch of her, standing there in her plum-coloured bathing dress, to his white pages. He discusses her head, shown against sky and sea, as a subtle and beautiful relation of browns and ambers and pinks. Her eyes were a surprising brown, greenish in face of the light, and her eyelashes made a line of blackish purple when the eyelids were lowered. Her hair seemed amber, light amber to brown, but often it held coppery lights too, and a sort of deep heliotrope sheen and shadow, as now, against sunset. The bloom of her skin, he says, was too delicate to injure

with human language—he only indicates a flush of health under the tan of sun and voyage, and a vividness of colouring that came when her feelings were high. He does tell us that her mouth utterly satisfied the mind, with its pink deeper than coral, and a stain of some still richer hue—he never can decide what it is, and vermilion-purple is the nearest he can come to it. She had a way of turning up the corners of her mouth at him. Ruby called it making a fox-face. Then he speaks, geometrically, of certain curves which presented her to notice as a young woman. He makes more than a score of attempts, one time and another, to convey the movement and fine beauty of those curves, to describe certain relations between one part of her and another.

She replied to Sir Richard, showing small, sharp teeth and umber shadows in the delicious cavern of her mouth: "I couldn't help it. There's something funny in the afternoon, or in the sea—something that makes one feel dreamy."

He smiled indulgently at her. "What does it make you dream of, visionary, yet not unpractical Lychnis?"

She answered his smile. "Do you remember the seascape in some dessert-plates of daddy's at home? They come from Asia, I think—old, buried Asia. I thought I had got melted into that picture."

Ruby, willing and adoring slave of the finer girl, never venturing to move without her except under orders, called from the companion-way: "Do come, Licky darling." And Licky, her inward heart at that

moment speaking, did not refuse. But she repeated to Sir Richard, as she went off: "I believe we have got melted into a picture. We are going to have an adventure in a dessert-plate."

When the two young women came back again, clothed and glowing (we hear that the tiny cabin was electrically warmed), evening was on the sea. They drew off a little to watch their ship, a blotch of brown-green floating on deep green water under a sky of dissolving lemon fire. Terence Fitzgerald still rode in the bows, tall, rapt and motionless (except that a sigh would now and then escape him, with a sentence or two). For him such things as Ambrose notes, axes of reference and other matters of exact detail, were not of moment. He had a fair beard, and he was bard-like and communed with the lordly ones, riding in the bows of the boat. And presently, when the *Floating Leaf* drifted across the disc of the sun, he lifted his hands up, and his brows furrowed in what Ambrose calls the pain of his vision. He spoke:

"I saw a cloud of them like peach-blossom blown over the sea."

"A cloud of what?" asked Sir Richard.

"The beautiful people."

Sir Richard was tickled.

"They went sunwards, with an ecstasy on their faces, and we are to follow them."

"Ecstasy's all very well in these tricky waters, Terence, but I should prefer to see their navigation certificates."

Terence smiled. "Believe me or not, my scientific Richard, we are to find a heavenly country."

Lychnis gazed at him round-eyed and more or less believing. She was prepared to believe everything that sounded beautiful. "He's in the dessert-plate, too," she murmured.

Sir Richard started the engine and they went back to the ship. Ambrose notes how swiftly she loomed up out of the twilight, and adds that as they went on board a fierce, foreign face scowled at them out of a port-hole.

3

AMBROSE had passed but a few minutes in his cabin, arranging his impressions and making a few colour notes, when Lord Sombrewater's man knocked with a message. "His lordship's compliments, Mr. Herbert, and will you be good enough to step along to his lordship's room?"

Ambrose stepped along, and describes the two men whom he found before a decanter of sherry in the suffused light of the state-room. There were bamboos and clouds painted on the delicate walls, so that they might have been sitting in the grove where the Sages held their sessions at home. Lord Sombrewater and George Sprot had each a cigar and a glass of sherry. The former always had a cigar and a glass of sherry at seven o'clock, and Sprot would have a cigar and a glass of sherry with anybody at any time of day. The two were in consultation, if that can be called a consultation where the one party is merely testing the reactions of the other party to his announcements.

Ambrose was greeted affably, but with swiftness and decision. "Come in, Ambrose. Sit down." And Ambrose was in a chair. "A council to-morrow morning." And Ambrose had made a note on his tablet.

"A glass of sherry." And the golden liquid was poured out. But Ambrose did not touch it.

Lord Sombrewater was economical in thought, in word, in movement. He wasted no man's time, and no woman's. He achieved his desires with the maximum of deliberation and the minimum of means, and he did not regard the achievement as an occasion for the wasteful output of sentiment. He had produced three things of importance—a world-business in electrical goods, a bamboo garden, and Lychnis. He had created the business by the remorseless application of drastic and ever-renewed principles of economy as regards both production and disposal. He had created his bamboo garden by an economy of mental effort, working to time-schedule, concentrated utterly during the appointed hour upon the subject in hand. And he had created Lychnis with an economy in the matter of demonstrative affection that his wife secretly thought distressing.

As to appearance, he was short—six inches shorter, except for Sprot, than the shortest of his six companions. He was bald longitudinally from the crown. Yet he dominated. He had little plump, masterful hands. He had a swift, bird-like glance that dwelt shrewdly for a moment and divined motives. And in the name Sombrewater there was for Ambrose (who observes that such impressions come vaguely at sea) some reminder of the deep lakes and the torrents tumbling among the crags where he had built those murmuring factories—some reminder of the scenes that from boyhood must

have entered into his lordship's being, to flower in Lychnis, perhaps to dream in her, vicariously and uneconomically.

As for George Sprot, he was a plain, ordinary man, with nondescript hair and unbeautiful form and structureless, unintelligent face. He was a "practical" man, and he had been attached in some subordinate capacity to Lord Sombrewater's enterprise, and invited to join the Sages (but he did not know it), as representing that great body of uninstructed, biased and congenitally foolish opinion by which human affairs are so largely ruled. His motto was, that one man is as good as another, but towards men who had achieved distinction in the fields of painting, literature and music he adopted an attitude of convinced disrespect. Towards an industrial viscount he adopted an attitude of careful familiarity which scarcely concealed his adulation.

Just at present he seemed to be in a state of distressing nervous excitement. One would have said that the restraint of his employer's manner was irksome to him, that with some other man he might have been impatient. He was impatient with Ambrose, indeed, because Ambrose was in no hurry to ask questions, and with Ambrose he had no hesitation in showing it. His manner towards Ambrose, we learn, was the manner of a man towards a paid servant, though Ambrose was not, as a matter of fact, a paid servant.

Ambrose did at last put one necessary question: "Is there anything special for the agenda?"

Lord Sombrewater shot him a glance. "Mutiny of the crew."

Ambrose wrote on his tablet, "Mutiny of the crew." Then he asked, as usual: "Anything else?"

A sound like the collapse of a heart escaped from Sprot. "Mutiny!" he exclaimed, interrupting under compulsion of his feelings—"Mutiny! Don't you understand? The crew have threatened mutiny. There is—you said so, I think, Lord Sombrewater—there is actual danger."

"Mutiny is likely to be accompanied by violence," remarked Ambrose.

"But, good God!" Sprot burst out, "don't you see—I——" He met Lord Sombrewater's eye (he was appealing, of course, to him through the protective ears of Ambrose). "Has it quite been realized that—er—that—er—we have women on board—girls? That——"

There was a knock at one of the doors, and he performed what must have given him the sensation of a considerable saltatory feat. He jumped, in brief. But it was Lychnis, in a flowered dressing-gown, with her hair shaken loose to dry. She shrank back a little at sight of Sprot, as a primrose might shrink from a boot.

She ran her comb through the waves of hair, making them crackle. "Did I hear you say there's going to be mutiny?"

"That is so," answered her father. He turned to Sprot. "Thank you for your advice, and, of course, not a word to the women." Sprot was dismissed, in

a condition of uncontrol that Ambrose thought pitiable. Ambrose was asked, by a motion of the hand, to remain.

It was the half-hour before dinner that Lord Sombrewater liked to spend with Lychnis. Regularly at seven-thirty o'clock he waited for her to come in from her adjoining room, and very often she did. Within limits his affection for his daughter might be said to be unconsidered. In regard to his daughter there was an abeyance of his deliberate personality. He loved her, in fact. Ambrose tells us that the enjoyment of his wealth and his rank had been first and foremost in the activity of acquiring them, as an end in itself; that it was a new and exquisite gratification to him when he got Lychnis to dower with them. He liked Ambrose to be there during those half-hours, partly because Ambrose gave Lychnis pleasure by his conversation and advice. Ambrose is aware that Lord Sombrewater thought him to be a harmless kind of man. He knows that by a method of his own Lord Sombrewater had formed the opinion, on consideration of his written work, that Ambrose was the man to transmit his daughter's beauty, in the written word, to posterity. Terence Fitzgerald, who painted for the business those wonderful and inspiring posters of god-like men radiating auras of golden brilliance, was expected, likewise, to transmit her beauty on canvas and in verse; but Terence was not asked in for the half-hour before dinner. Lord Sombrewater had formed the opinion that Terence

also was an innocent man, but he was a poet, and the behaviour of a poet was less certainly predictable than that of a white-minded recorder of things done. And, indeed, the innocence of poets, in juxtaposition with the innocence of maidens, is apt to work out unhappily, sometimes.

So Lychnis might go on brushing her hair, and Ambrose might, since somebody must if her beauty was to be recorded, describe what the rhythmic movement of her arms should reveal ; and if, when her body twisted in the flowered dressing-gown as she flung her hair out, the line of breast or back or thigh should please him, he might be allowed to write it accurately down.

4

When dinner was finished, Ambrose and Fulke Arnott sat a long time over their coffee: in attendance, the fierce, foreign face that had scowled from a port-hole.

"There's a council to-morrow morning, Fulke," said Ambrose.

"Is there?" rejoined Fulke. "What about?"

"Mutiny of the crew."

"Mutiny of the—— You mean——"

"I mean they are going on strike."

Fulke Arnott, Ambrose says, was a young man with the soul of a Greek athlete in the body of a chimpanzee, the thoughts of a saint and the means of expression of a fish-porter. He describes him as the cleanest-hearted man who ever set himself to the task of self-expression in foul language. He allowed the fountain of his genius to play in a preliminary manner. "You mean to tell me that those stinking Chinks, those crawling, paste-coloured liver-flukes, those doped nightmare beetles, have had the bowels to go on strike?"

"Precisely that."

Fulke's face was greasy with excitement. "Then, Ambrose, we may solemnly thank God. We meet in the eastern hemisphere what we ran away from in the

west. We learn this hour, comrade Ambrose, that the blinking revolution is world-wide, and the New World is about to be."

"With a population of Chinks, as described?" Ambrose asked. It appears that Fulke Arnott was a sidereal chemist whom Lord Sombrewater, on discovering that he knew about the interiors of stars and had a touch of quaint, constructive genius, had attached to his works with instructions to reflect upon the interiors of furnaces. It amused Lord Sombrewater to employ a revolutionary with advantage to his business, and he was fond of his conversation. Fulke on his part admired his employer as an artist, while attacking him as the world's greatest grinder of the faces of the poor.

"What do the others make of it?" he asked.

"Sombrewater discloses nothing."

"He has the personality of a dynamo."

"Sprot is alarmed."

"Naturally, the snail-gutted bourgeois."

"Frew-Gaff says they can't get the better of our trained intelligence."

"He believes in science, Frew-Gaff does."

"Terence thinks it's very wonderful. He says the high gods are leading us."

"It's my belief the high gods are leading us up the garden. What about Blackwood and Quentin?"

"I haven't told them yet."

"It's no good looking for Blackwood now. He's in a trance in his cabin."

Ambrose smiled as he thought of Blackwood in his cabin, striving to hide from life and desire. Blackwood, a too sensitive man, found the strain of life in an industrial society more than he could bear. Also, he was not successful in achieving his somewhat exquisite desires. He failed, for example, with women. Unlike Fulke Arnott, he took no consolation from dreaming of a perfect world. Fulke was for changing his surroundings; Blackwood, on the other hand, had convinced himself that there never can be happiness for anyone, and he found this belief sustaining. He had therefore embraced what he understood to be the pure doctrine of Indian Buddhism, and spent his time dodging existence by a method of protective mimicry, in which he imitated the appearance of Nothing. He had resigned the position of physiological adviser in Lord Sombrewater's therapeutic apparatus department, and now lived in a cottage and occupied himself with the technique of self-destruction. But, as he was soon miserably to learn, he had the processes without the reality; the form quite without the inspiration.

"Quentin, I imagine, is not in a trance?" Ambrose queried.

"Quentin!" Fulke's brow blackened. "With Lychnis and Ruby for certain. Showing off his bushy beard and his princely figure in the light of the moon. The libertine! The outsize, libidinous, bearded rat!"

"One would not describe him as a rat. There is something too royal and magnanimous about him."

"Oh, no doubt. He has a royal air. And ruddy cheeks. And fine red lips. And a chest like a beech-tree. And the legs of Ulysses. And arms that hug. The sort of man that young girls dream of."

"It cannot be denied that he is a refined scholar."

"You don't grudge him his successes. Nor do I, you fish! In that realm of endeavour you only have to try and you are successful. But they don't know, poor innocents, how deceptive size is. It's the promise that attracts them. The performance is apt to be disappointing."

"You are warm. And—may I say?—there is a certain odd discrepancy between your declared views on sex purity and the somewhat promiscuous and even sordid habits of your imagination in that regard."

"Pink-cheeked Ambrose, rosy-fingered Ambrose, continent Ambrose, I don't reconcile anything. I am the only man in this ship who doesn't reconcile his ideas with one another, the only one who isn't a blasted walking logic, the only one——" He stopped and patted Ambrose on the shoulder. "Come on; let's go up on deck. I forgot I'm a Sage. The trouble is, you know, Ambrose, that, I mean to say—I shouldn't mind if it wasn't Lychnis. He can do what he likes about Ruby, but when it's Lychnis—— She's too good to be seduced by anybody but a winged, frowning Eros, and there aren't such things. What time is it? She and Frew-Gaff and I are going to begin a new series of calculations to-night. The wonder that girl is,

Ambrose ! She feels about mathematics the way some people feel about flowers. She told me once that formulæ bud and blossom for her like roses. She's all rhythm, that girl. She has the most astonishing perceptions about physical reality, and all unknowingly. It's my belief that with just a little more she'll find herself accidentally in possession of some extraordinary secret. She has something in her that no one else in this ship understand, something mysterious, insight—I don't know what to call it—and she is unconscious of it. The wonder ! The darling ! Put that down in your notebooks and ponder it. I can see in your eye that you are composing sentences as I go along, you soulless, metal-minded register."

Ambrose remarks that he couldn't do better than record the conversation as it fell.

5

PRESENTLY they were on deck. They found Quentin with Lychnis and Ruby (in cloaks of emerald and rose respectively, with glimmering shoes), showing off his bushy beard and his heroic figure in the light of a yellow rose-leaf moon. The ship was moving gently in the foam-flowering fields of the sea. Above them, against a swaying almond-tree of stars, could be seen the head of a seaman looking over the canvas of the navigating bridge. There was no sound but the sound of the sea and Quentin's rich voice and the girls' laughter.

"Five-and-twenty past nine, Lychnis," said Fulke.

"Oh, bother!" She frowned. But the thought of the calculations, once planted in her consciousness, began to attract her. "I'll come," she said; and chose to descend to the lower deck by an iron ladder that the sailors used in passage from foc's'le to bridge. She vanished into the darkness like some faint emerald emanation.

"And your mother wants you, Ruby," said Ambrose.

The rose emanation went slowly and sulkily after the emerald, and Ambrose delivered his message on the subject of mutiny with a gesture towards a light that outlined a door in the swaying foc's'le.

"Well, I'll take 'em on single-handed, in defence of virginity," said Quentin, "though chastity requires no defence, for, as Judas Thomas tells us, chastity is an athlete who is not overcome. How beautiful is the story of Perpetua, the virgin martyred at Carthage, and of Thekla, for whom the lioness fought with other beasts in the arena! No, Ambrose. Purity is absolute. The pure virgin cannot be defiled, for her heart is not in the work. And that is why we need have no scruples regarding her."

"Thekla?" asked Ambrose. "I am not acquainted with that story. I must look it up."

6

At ten o'clock precisely Ambrose reported to Lord Sombrewater, who was playing bridge with his captain and two of the three ladies—Lady Frew-Gaff and Mrs. Sprot. Ruby's red head was bent over a book and Lady Sombrewater knitted. The three ladies did not differ in appearance more noticeably than sparrows. Indeed, they closely resembled sparrows, among the painted bamboos. They had all three been very pretty girls, and that was why their husbands had married them. They had married them before they knew exactly what kind of prettiness and what accomplishments they required women to have. As regards Lady Sombrewater, the very negative of her husband, Ambrose wondered how Lychnis had been gotten out of that nonentity.

"And where is Lychnis?" she asked, as he came in.

"She's with Sir Richard Frew-Gaff and Fulke Arnott, doing sums."

"Queer girl. I missed her after dinner. I thought she was with you."

"She and Ruby were with Quentin after dinner," the captain innocently said.

Lord Sombrewater's eye was expressionless, like a pheasant's. The three ladies exchanged glances, glanced

at Ruby, and when she glanced up from her book simultaneously glanced back again.

There was silence for an hour.

"Game and rubber," said Mrs. Sprot at last.

"And bedtime," added Lady Frew-Gaff. And there was a great pushing back of chairs and shaking of handbags and jingling of coins and picking up of dropped odds and ends. The choleric Chink came in with Bovril and whisky-and-soda, and as he went out again, with a last furious good-night, the ship gave a distinct heave.

Then Lychnis came in. "Yes," she replied to a question, "there's a wind blowing. Terence is outside sniffing it. He says it's full of the Peach-Blossom people. He says they keep on flicking the tops of the little waves with their pink feet."

"And what did you say to that?" asked her father.

"I said no doubt it was true. He looks at the waves a lot, so he ought to know. I told him about my waves."

"Your waves?"

"Light waves and that. Calculations about them, in rhyme and blank verse. We had wonderful ones to-night—long flat ones like trains and some like falling rockets, and a series like the rhizome of a bamboo that keeps on putting out a new shoot. Fulke nearly cried because a demonstration of Sir Richard's was so beautiful."

By an understanding convenient to everybody, Lady Sombrewater retained the right to use a tone of authority with her daughter, and now she ordered her daughter to bed. Swiftly she went to bed herself, thus putting

disobedience out of sight. The other two ladies followed, shepherding Ruby.

It very often happened that Ambrose spent the last half-hour before bedtime in conversation with those two. It was Lord Sombrewater's custom to drink a whisky-and-soda and to smoke a cigar, and Lychnis would chatter or gloom or behave idiotically, as her mood might be. To-night she gloomed.

"Cross to-night, Licky?" asked her father.

"Dissatisfied." She pulled a lock of hair over her eyes and bit it—a trick of childhood when people looked at her and she was sulking.

"What beautiful hands Sir Richard Frew-Gaff has got!" she said. "They move like beings, with minds, contriving things. Mine are merely something to finish the shape of the arm."

Ambrose looked at her arms and hands—orchids waving on stalks. Fit to express passion, they might be considered. He looked at her feet. She had pale green stockings to go with her emerald dress, and dark green snake-skin shoes. Her dress was a sheath to the flower of her body. Underneath, as Lady Sombrewater had told him, thinking him a most suitable recipient for the confidence—underneath she wore tenderest stalk-green silk. She liked to feel that her clothes were petals, a living integument of nature.

"Been working too hard?" said Lord Sombrewater.

"No," she answered emphatically. "I don't think I work at all. What I do comes to me, and it's not tiring."

"Well," he observed, "it makes you scratch your head a good deal, judging by your hair."

Her hair was erratic in disposition. Loosed from control, it grew and flowed from her head in fan-like streams. There was evidence that her hand had been plunged recently in its depths, for the tonic effect of irritation on the sap of her genius. She took out the pins, and her hair spread and rippled down her emerald dress, so that to the queer, associative mind of Ambrose she seemed to gloom from a torrent of some cascading tropic fern. The high forehead, heavy with thought, the considering eyes, with the lids and the shadows that spoke of what he chooses to call her plant-like passions, were seen in a wavy, ferny fountain. Nor does he stop at that in his curious description. He often describes her as plant-like, but here he talks of her as having affinities with the insect. He says that she produced an effect on him as if she were an insect, with a remote, non-human mind, regarding him from among the fronds of a fern.

"Still, I'm not tired," she said, enigmatically smiling.

"Nevertheless, you had better go to bed," put in Ambrose.

She walked towards the door (painted cloudy between two painted clumps of bamboo) of her bedroom. She walked with small steps in a line. It was in her walk that she became a woman. One saw that her knees and back were a woman's. In the open door she twisted

round on sinuous hips and thrust out a hand through a torrent of hair in a gesture of good-night.

"Why is she so often moody, do you suppose?" asked Lord Sombrewater when the door was shut.

"She is twenty-two. She is likely to be dissatisfied until she is mated," Ambrose observed.

Lord Sombrewater accepted this with considerable reluctance. "No doubt there is something in what you say. The observations of a spectator are certainly very illuminating. I hardly seem to be putting her in the way of getting a mate, though, at present." He smiled, passing it off.

"It would be difficult, no doubt, for her to find one among those on board." He wondered whether, in fact, Lord Sombrewater was not even consciously hiding her away.

"How does she react towards Quentin?" he was asked.

"It is to be presumed that it is a matter of indifference to a flower what wind carries the pollen, or whence."

"You are doubtless right."

"Without pursuing a misleading analogy too far, it is to be remarked that a certain type of flower-minded and flower-passionate young woman is often strangely careless in selecting a lover."

"That is so," said her father slowly.

7

EARLY next morning Ambrose came on deck in a monkish dressing-gown with a fleecy towel round his neck. The wind had fallen. The morning was fresh and tender and delicate as a morning in a Chinese silk, and the sea was rippling and black like a lake. It was time for the matutinal exercises. Lord Sombrewater's valet and the fierce Chink were in attendance with sponges and other matters ; fresh and sea-water showers were fixed conveniently ; but it seemed to Ambrose that there began to be something queer about these English habits in those far eastern seas.

Five of the Sages were already exercising, or standing under the showers with expressions of enjoyment or endurance. Lord Sombrewater was thorough but silent, and occupied himself with the punch-ball. Fulke Arnott, deep-chested, long-armed, bow-legged and hairy as an ape, felt his limbs with closed eyes and imagined himself a piece by Pheidias. Sprot, the pot-bellied and knock-kneed, produced in his throat a noise which he called singing, and Ambrose presumes that he felt in the remnant of his soul some echo of what in an ancestor may have been a free impulse. Terence stood under

the fresh-water shower like a Druid. His exercises were those prescribed for occultists, and his mind, as the element drenched him, was concentrated on the purity of the element. Then he moved to the sea-water shower, and concentrated on salt health. When he had finished he moved over and stood by the rail, tall and stately, shading his eyes and gazing into the rising sun. Far and wide the little dark waves broke idly in tiny jets and sprays of white foam. "We float, not on water," he was heard to say, "but on meadows of snowdrops and deep-leaved violets."

Sir Richard Frew-Gaff was most amiable of the Sages at that time of the day. With his higher centres a little relaxed from the preceding day's contemplation of physical reality, and warm with anticipation of another day's work, he appeared benevolently, as it were, in the world of living phenomena, and cracked a couple of jokes. At the moment he was hanging by the knees on the horizontal bar and hailed Ambrose, passing in his white towel from the shower.

"Hallo, Ambrose!"

"Hallo!" The pale blue eyes of the scientist were looking at him upside down. "You're pinker than ever—like a pink cherub in a white cloud." Sir Richard swung and landed erect on the mat. "What's the secret of your morning freshness, Ambrose? You must sleep like the sainted dead in paradise. Do you dream at all?"

"Not unless I want to."

"Well, I envy you. I do not sleep too well nowadays."

Ambrose would not expect to sleep, he tells us, if his brains were full of imaginations that chained him to the world of physical appearance.

Then Arthur Ravenhill came gravely from his cabin. He did not use the gymnastic apparatus. The functions of his body, assimilative and excretory, were regulated by the operations of his mind. He digested consciously, and his exercises took place in his inside. He was able to perform gymnastic feats with his liver and kidneys, and had in mind to achieve the supreme accomplishment and reverse the processes of the alimentary canal. He was very thin. He had the air, in fact, of one who has attained a considerable degree of self-mortification, and he was able at any time of the day or night to discipline himself into one of the four trances.

"Morning," said Lord Sombrewater. "Didn't see you yesterday."

He stood with folded hands. "Having been led into sensual thoughts by the beauty of the afternoon, it seemed to me necessary that I should undertake the four intent contemplations. Thus, abandoning the idea that there is an ego, realizing that beauty is a glamour in the mind of that which has no ego, having rid myself of desire for any but spiritual forms of existence and then convinced myself that all existence, however abstract, is evil, the sensual images melted away."

He passed through the group of gymnasts and stood

under the shower like an ascetic at the door of his forest cave, who by chance receives cold water on the back of his neck.

"There's a council this morning at eleven," Ambrose told him.

Last of all Quentin came striding from his luxurious bed. He certainly outshone the rest as a conception in muscle. The deck trembled and the apparatus shook with the weight of his leaps and his swinging limbs. From the great pectoral slab to the Achilles tendon he was a wonder—a muscular temple, a cathedral of bone and sinew, florid and huge. When he was holding a long arm balance on the parallel bars his torso resembled the junction of two branches of a beech. Within him, too, there was no mean nervous system and brain. He knew the classic poets, Greek and Latin, by heart, and was an expert in the art of post-mediæval, early Renaissance periods in all countries of the world. Ambrose describes him finally as a princely ruffian.

The exercises finished, they took coffee and met in council. At nine o'clock precisely Lord Sombrewater rapped on the table before him, and the Sages stopped talking. He was an expert in the chair. He had done a great deal of business in chairs, and from behind them. They afforded excellent opportunities for controlling large blocks of business by means of majorities, for giving harmless vent to the opinions of cranks, and for obtaining the consent of shareholders to reasonable proposals.

He began: "The situation we have to consider is

the following : Our intention was to visit Japan. The crew we took on at Sydney, after that strange trouble we had there, seem to be under the influence of some mysterious fear. That fierce-faced Chink chose them for us, you remember. Well, they have intimated that they will sink the ship unless we land them forthwith at a Chinese port."

"Why ?" asked Sprot.

It was a question the chairman expected. Shareholders were apt to ask "Why ?" His technique was to unfold just such a minimum of a situation as sufficed to answer questions.

"They allege, as a matter of fact, that they have wireless orders from their union."

"Are all those Chinks and dagos and things in a union ?"

"It's international now," put in Fulke Arnott. "I would like to point out to you the interesting features of this situation. We're a quarry. The arch-capitalist escapes from Europe with his accomplices in search of a year's quiet to mature his plans, and labour brings him to book in the middle of the China Seas. It's good. It's pretty. It's encouraging."

"It's all that," observed Lord Sombrewater. "It's also pure nonsense. In any case I do not consider myself a fugitive."

"I don't want to imply that you ran away," Fulke replied. "The fact is that your position is one in which you can afford to take a year off, so long as you watch

the intrigues of the henchmen you've elevated and see that they don't manœuvre you out of the position of control"

"You begin to see the point. The central fact is my position. It is true that I own the mines, the railways, the crops, the whole activity of large pieces of several continents. If I cannot escape them, neither can they escape me. I am their light and air. Without my activity, races perish. Unless I continue to produce business enterprises, as Terence produces pictures and Richard Frew-Gaff his hypotheses, nations will starve."

"My answer," said Fulke, "is: Let them." His green-brown eyes glowed. He had a vision, as Ambrose presently ascertained, of a few young men and women, few and free, living on nuts in a wood.

"We wander from the point," said the chairman. "I do not believe for a moment that there are any orders from any union. The trouble is something quite different. But we have to consider what action we shall take. Let us have views round the table. What is your view of our action, Fulke?"

"In theory——"

"Never mind that. Let's hear what another business man has to say. George Sprot, your views, please."

Sprot, who had been agitatedly twisting his fingers, was flattered. "Defy them! If they won't work, let them starve. If they mutiny, shoot them."

"So useful, George," said Quentin. "So practical."

Lord Sombrewater tapped with his hammer. "Terence."

"I saw a cloud of beings, the colour of peach-blossom, drifting over the sea. They swayed and bent like one branch blown by the same wind. They were going towards China."

"Attach them, Terence," exclaimed the irrepressible Quentin. "They'll do instead of steam when the boilers go out."

Once more the hammer. "Richard."

"I suggest that we run the ship ourselves. Fulke and Lychnis and I can easily work out a theory of navigation. We can complete it in a few days. Some of us must be crew. Quentin's a whole crew of stokers n himself."

Quentin passed a remark which Ambrose faithfully records, but we need not trouble ourselves with it.

"That's all very well, Richard," said the chairman; "but in a tempest I should hesitate to trust entirely in your very harmonious calculations. And in any case, the officers have not deserted."

"Well, let us be the crew."

"I don't know that Barnes would care to run the ship with a crew consisting chiefly of professors. Still, it might be practicable, after we had disposed of the mutineers. Blackwood?"

"I have nothing to suggest. It is a matter of indifference to me where I am or what I am asked to do."

"Quentin?"

"I intend," said Quentin, "to avail myself of the opportunities for experience in both countries, and I don't mind which comes first. There are customs in both that I desire to experience. There are things that I want to see. And there are, I fancy, in Tokyo, examples of the miraculous flowering of Sung art, in which we meet with an idealism, a spirituality, that cannot but be ennobling. What moral grandeur! What ecstatic visions! And my Buddhist friend on my left should not fail to consider the Ukiyoyé, those pictures of the frail, vanishing world, those exquisite reproaches to our transitory desires, those——"

"Precisely. When we reach Tokyo the matter shall receive consideration. In the meantime I would propose, as a practical contribution to the discussion, that we inform the crew that we are entirely ready to fall in with their suggestions and proceed to a Chinese port."

The rest were silent. "I suppose it is the obvious course," said Frew-Gaff at last.

"In the absence of any better proposal, such as I had hoped to receive," said his lordship, "I think it is. We can discuss what to do next to-morrow. Is that agreed?"

It was agreed, and the meeting broke up.

8

THE next council took place, not on the following day, but some days after. In the meantime there had been a tempest, with devils howling in the wind and waves going all ways at once and other discomforts. The *Floating Leaf* got out of control, and now, by what all but Terence called a stroke of luck, they were aground among the reeds in the mouth of a river, perhaps a mile up-stream. The river debouched between fantastic hills like green oyster-shells, and there were some queer sailing craft, with masts like bent fishing-rods, and other strange tackle, alongside. The sky was fantastic, like the hills, and there was in the air a liveliness and odour of spring. Here and there on a hill-top a plum-tree in blossom, and by a rock on the river bank a clump of narcissus on green, springing stems. Here and there a willow or grove of bamboo. "Much like *Arundinaria Simoni*, from here," Lord Sombrewater remarked. "Those bamboos should do well in the sea air. Nothing like sea mists for bringing out their brilliance."

Terence dominated the council All of them were jubilant (except Blackwood), having been brought safe out of danger of their lives. Terence harped on the fulfilment of his vision.

"But what are we to do now?" asked George Sprot —"landed here like this?"

Sombrewater let his opinion be known at once. "Terence has convinced me," he said. "Henceforward we cannot do better than trust ourselves entirely to his pink-footed fairies. Which direction is now indicated by the Peach-blossom people, Terence?"

A light was on the brow of the bard. "They drift up-stream, between the willows."

"Well, now," broke in Fulke Arnott, "it so happened that I was talking just now to that fierce-faced Chink. Strangely enough, he knows this country, and he says that the river is only navigable a few miles up, except for small craft."

"Then," replied Terence, "we are to proceed in small craft."

"Or until we meet some Green Figs going the other way," put in Quentin.

Terence did not hear. "This morning as I was walking on the deck," he continued, "there passed by among the hills a man riding upon a goat. He had a face of supernatural majesty and his eyes were terrible, and he rode beside the river and on into the hills, driving his goat with a branch of peach-blossom."

"The indications are plain," said Lord Sombrewater. "We leave the ship here in the care of Barnes and the officers. The crew, I am told, have already disappeared, except for Fulke's friend. We ourselves make a journey inland with the portable wireless until the

peach-blossom cloud comes to rest and attaches itself to a tree. If necessary, we accompany the portent as far as Tibet, but personally I hope the destination of these ghosts is within a reasonable distance. What do you say ? "

" I have a feeling," said Fulke, " that it won't be very far. That same Chinaman spoke of a dragon that is famous in these parts. It lives, I believe, in the hills yonder."

" We must see that bird," said Lord Sombrewater.

To George Sprot it was criminal levity to propose exchanging the conveniences of their expensive machine for the discomforts and dangers of an excursion through an unknown country, and all because of the drivelling of a literary man.

" What will the ladies say ! " he exclaimed.

" Naturally we shall consult everybody concerned. Shall we do so at once ? "

Taking Ambrose with him, the owner of the vessel went forthwith to discuss matters with the captain. In twenty minutes the whole thing was arranged, and Barnes was in receipt of full instructions as to the course he was to pursue in case of trouble.

" I shall, of course, keep in close touch by wireless," said Lord Sombrewater.

" That makes it all quite easy," said Captain Barnes. " There's one thing, though. We must have some sort of crew on board."

" Oddly enough," said the first officer, " that Chinaman butler and man-of-all-work mentioned to me this

morning that he would have no difficulty in getting hold of a thoroughly reliable crew."

"Did he indeed?" observed Lord Sombrewater. "Can you tell me whether the said Chinaman had anything to do with the steering of us the night before last in the storm?"

Captain Barnes laughed. "It's a fact he was on the navigating bridge, lending a hand. But still—what could he do?"

"Seems to me he took the opportunity to bring us to his own door. Well, that's that. I shall leave the maids behind. Our wives will need them in any case."

They went on deck and found the rest of the company gathered there. The two mothers, with the advice of Mrs. Sprot, were quite definite; their daughters should not go on such an absurd expedition. "This is the maddest thing my husband has agreed to yet," said Lady Sombrewater. "I protested from the beginning. I protested against the voyage. I pointed out that we were quite comfortable at home, but I was not listened to. I protested against this outlandish China, but I was laughed at. I protested during the storm. I had a feeling that we were being plotted against. But nobody seemed to be able to do anything or have any sense at all. And now look what a pickle we're in, landed here like this, as Mr. Sprot so rightly says. I protest——" She looked round for something to protest against. "I protest against this kind of scenery. It's most un-English. My daughter shall not go."

"Of course not, mother," said Lychnis. But she smiled at her father and pinched Ambrose's arm.

Ruby saw it. "Oh, mother," she pouted, interpreting the signs, "if Lychnis is going, why can't I go, too?"

"But Lychnis is not going," said Lady Sombrewater, with firm reproof; and Ruby, who was not so quick as she was red and white and lovely, looked terribly confused.

"Then," put in Quentin, "the sensations that we experience on our journey will be very much abated in sharpness, because, for a man who is pure in heart, like myself, there is nothing gives so much point to the beauty of early morning, to the sudden revelation of a landscape, the contemplation of the purity of flowers, the noonday rest, and the bed among bracken under the winds of night, as the neighbourhood of a couple of maidens."

The three ladies glanced at the girls and at one another, and their eyes were guardian angels. "I absolutely put my foot down," said Lady Frew-Gaff.

"And I mine," added Lady Sombrewater. "In any case, if one of the girls fell sick, who would look after her, I should like to know?"

"Oh, come now, my dear!" put in her husband. "I myself, though not an expert, know a good deal about the body——"

"Encyclopædic Richard," observed Quentin. "And for the matter of that, I also know something of the body."

"And Blackwood was actually a professional physiologist."

"A physiologist is not a mother," said Lady Sombrewater.

"The body," observed Blackwood, "is but a collection of obscene guts and unpleasant juices. Beauty is therefore a superficial illusion and the reality is extremely revolting. The body——"

Lady Sombrewater waved the girls away. She was used to these uncompromising declarations of the Sages, but she had not got to like them, and she could still protect the girls.

"The body," continued Blackwood, "is merely an involuted skin, highly specialized at various points, and capable of sensations, especially tactile sensations, which some—as, for instance, Quentin, who has not received enlightenment—consider desirable. Man, in brief, is nothing but a piece of skin capable, in contact with another skin, of a supreme sensation which results in the establishment of a third sensational skin. Of the behaviour of these skins and their obscene accompaniments, and of the cunning fluids by which, for their extraordinary object of perpetuation, the said skins are cleverly kept in what is curiously known as health, I have a considerable knowledge. The two maiden skins, therefore, would be in a position to receive expert assistance should they fall ill and inexplicably wish to recover."

"Mr. Blackwood!" began the three ladies at once.

But Lord Sombrewater put an end to the discussion. "We'll settle all that presently," he said; and they heard in his voice their doom, and perhaps (though Ambrose was not able to find out whether their thoughts were precise) the doom of their daughters.

9

Ambrose found an opportunity, during the afternoon, to ascertain from the two girls their views as to the expedition.

He had gone ashore with them, at the instance of Lychnis, and they had climbed to the top of a humped green hill so as to survey the country. There they stood, under a plum-tree in blossom, protected, as Lychnis observed, by cousins of Terence's messengers from Paradise. Lychnis herself was in a fragile plum-coloured frock, out of compliment to them, and her red-haired fellow was in willow-green.

Behind, between two contortions of cliff, lay the sea. Far away, across the wrinkled and fissured hills, there were mountains with the unmelted snows of winter lying on their tops like petals of narcissus. The afternoon was spring-like, and there seemed to Ambrose to be a fragrance of lilies; but whether it came from distant fields or whether the girls were scented with it, he could not quite decide. But he suddenly remembered that the Chinaman had spoken of a great lake of water-lilies beyond the mountains of the interior.

Lychnis stood on the hill with her hands clasped behind her, frowning at the snows.

"Is that where we are going?" she asked.

"The indications point that way, I believe. Does it amuse you to go?"

"Oh yes! And really, if we don't find something new, something strange, there, I think I shall die. Shall we perhaps discover some secret of life there, do you suppose?"

"You mean?"

Ruby was wandering about, rather bored, and Lychnis, as often before, talked intimately to her confessor. "I am so tired of reading books and meeting people and thinking, just to fill up the time. I am so tired of being conscious and trying to be more conscious. It is a disease that a drink of genuine life would purge out of the system. I want to become so that I'm waiting to get up in the morning just because it is another day to live; then, when I lie down in bed at night, sleep would be a deep physical pleasure. I wish it was a young world, with only a few people in it, and spring meant that one would go out of doors and ride away on some quest."

"Romantic," he observed. "And is not that what you are to do now, with your squires?"

"But it will be only us, and we only fill up the time, without zest and unconsciousness. Would you call my father whole-hearted any more? He knows now that he makes what is not worth making, and he has lost touch with life. Sir Richard lives merely intellectually, and he only knows about the how of things and argues fantastically as to their why. He makes out

God to be a symbol in mathematics. Then Terence. His visions are old, and I think they are pathological and mad. His auras and reincarnations and glittering spirits from other planes, and all his vibrations and rhythms and things—they are the cloud-rack of a decaying personality. They are illusions of visions ; and who would follow them to the world's end, except daddy, more in contempt than faith ? And as for Blackwood, he is so disillusioned that he wants to come to an end, and maltreats his mind with some old lost discipline for making it think of nothing, which it was never meant to do. And Sprot does not even know that there are thoughts, or doubts, or despairs. He's merely a cell, and he can only market goods, I am sure without zest. No, Fulke is the only one who has any vision of a sweet and joyous world. He has youth in him, and desire, and all that. But his shape displeases me." She looked up at the plum-blossom burning on the branches above her.

" There is Quentin. He has zest," Ambrose observed.

" But what for ? Yet he pleases me, and if I find nothing at the end of this journey I think I may let him please me more—if he can. For one can have pleasure if one can have nothing else. Yet there are certain things about love that I don't thoroughly understand—you could tell me, if I could ask you. I think I could."

Her head was bent in thought. Then she raised up her passion-lidded eyes, and Ambrose took the opportunity to examine her state of mind.

"Perhaps it is not life that you desire," he said thoughtfully. "There is something else—you will understand what I mean some day."

"You mean love, I suppose?" she asked, indifferent.

"No, not that."

"I find love a bore," she observed. "It might not be, I can conceive. Several have loved me, and Fulke now I'm afraid, and Quentin, if we are to call that love. And I love myself undoubtedly. When I see myself in the mirror I wish, sometimes, that I were a young man, and I feel that if I were women would love me, and I would take one—perhaps Ruby, though she is rather stupid. I could love a god, if he wasn't too curly-headed and milk-white. Mine would be dark-haired, not fair, like Terence's clumsy Irish heroes. But there are no gods, unless there are some lost here in China. Mine would have an air of profound thoughtfulness. If there were gods, do you think I would have a chance?"

She looked so comically serious that Ambrose laughed at her.

She was petulant at his laughing. "You don't love me, do you, Ambrose? You only think I'm funny."

He says her sentence came at him like a flung blossom with a little dart in it. He records his answer:

"I can make no talk when it comes to 'I' and 'me.' Really, I'm not sure that I'm aware of feelings and desires and so forth." He remarks that he scarcely knew how to put it.

"Oh, I know," she replied scornfully. "You only

make notes. We are all specimens. Still, that's just as well, because if you were at all likely to love me"—she flushed, now, at the word spoken before in a rushing impulse—"there'd be nobody left to talk to. You know, Ambrose . . ." She hesitated, looking about in the grass as if words might spring up there. "It seems funny to say . . . I mean, all those men are a nuisance in one way or another. When they look at me their eyes are seeing me as a young woman. Daddy, even . . . you understand? Fulke displeasingly, because he's like a chimpanzee and I find it insulting, and Sprot sentimentally and disgustingly, and Quentin—rather excitingly. And Sir Richard, too, Ambrose, though it sounds wicked of me to say it, but I can't help knowing. Terence, of course, pretends I'm his inspiration. Do poets embrace their inspirations? I expect so. And with Arthur Blackwood it's the way he sternly doesn't look at me, and when I've been talking to him he always goes into four or five kinds of trances. It's all a nuisance. But you, when you look at me and talk to me, though I know you perceive every inch and movement of me and very many of my thoughts, but not all by any means, I don't mind. It is so, isn't it?"

He bowed, and admired her standing up straight and frowning and flushed against the stem of the young plum-tree. A pink blossom fluttered down on her.

She held on the way of her talk. "Now you are admiring me and making a mental note of my shape. You will record, later on, that the sky behind the

blossom "—she turned to look—" is all tender apple-green, because it's soon going to begin to be evening. Well, look at me." She stood up on the toes of her slender shoes, and threw her arms out and her head back, so that he could study her breast and throat. He did so, and discusses the twin blossoms of her, and her whole shape, as a relation of subtle, slender curves that had a most stimulating effect on the mind and carried it beyond thoughts of physical beauty to profound thoughts of an informing creative spirit. He mentions that her throat was a springing flower-stalk.

" There," she said at last. " You have looked, and it's nothing to me. It would not be nothing if I were in love. I should be glad and happy at being studied. But I'm glad to be quite assured that I'm not, because now I know that one day, soon perhaps, I shall be able to ask you questions—questions I could put to no woman, last of all my mother, and no other man. You are the only soul in the world, Ambrose, who could receive from a woman such questions as I shall ask you—the only soul who could answer them without being silly. Soon—there are things I must ask you soon. Over there "—she pointed to the distant mountains, now cold and spiritual in the sinking sun—" over there, perhaps, we shall find someone, and there will no longer be something missing. There will be a note found to complete a music. And you," she added with sudden malice—" you shall be marriage registrar."

Then Ruby came wandering back—a lazy, red-headed

Juno—and with her hands she clasped a mass of flowers to her bosom. "These are for the ship," she observed. "Why didn't you come and help me when I called? And what have you been jawing about? You're always jawing, you two."

"We've been talking most frightful stupid nonsense,' said Lychnis.

"I expect so," replied Ruby with unconcern.

Then some of the others came from the ship, and they all gathered flowers until the silver moon rose out of the fissure of a hill into the tender, trembling sky. Mist began to form, and drove them back to the *Floating Leaf*, and it was not long before there was nothing to be seen but the mist and the moon, and here and there a plum-tree on a black knoll rising out of the mist, and a flight of wild geese crossing the sky.

10

Next morning, not unexpectedly, the Chinaman presented himself before Ambrose in his cabin like a scowling apparition, and proposed, in respectful and professorial language, that he should accompany the party. "For," said he, "a guide to the country, its manners and customs, its flora and fauna; an interpreter of the language of the people, and more especially of their state of mind in regard to the several members of the party; a softener of passions; a holder forth of the timely coin; and, if need be, one who can remind men at the appropriate juncture of the unfortunate results that follow unthinking interference with the obvious will of Fate—such a one would perhaps be not without use to the party."

"Are you such a one?" asked Ambrose.

"While striving constantly to imitate the tranquil humility of the narcissus upon which we gaze through the port-hole, I am one who has made not altogether unavailing efforts to acquire the technique of such a one as I describe."

"Then such a one had better address his further inquiries to Lord Sombrewater."

The other bowed and accompanied Ambrose to the

owner's room, where he repeated his proposal. Ambrose noted with admiration how swiftly his chief put on an impassivity that did not seem less than that of the Chinaman. The little expressionless, pheasant eyes met eyes of unreadable black lacquer, and Ambrose records that there seemed to be a sort of communication going on, as between animals or birds.

Lord Sombrewater at once confirmed an impression which Ambrose had himself long since received. "You are a man of considerable understanding," he said. "You have, very markedly, the characteristic visage of a Sage."

"I have gone but a very little way," the Chinaman replied, "in imitation of those who have obtained wisdom, or, more correctly, of those who have learned to throw wisdom away."

"You are a deft waiter as well."

"That, noble viscount, comes of having perceived the inner nature of plates, glasses, table-napkins and the like. It is in such a purely menial capacity that I venture to offer my inexpert services."

"In what capacity were you on the navigating bridge that night we were driven ashore?"

"I desired to meditate from that exposed place upon the state of mind of the master when he said, 'The self-controlled man occupies himself with the unseen and not with what is visible,' and when he said, 'Purify the means of perception, so that by doing nothing all shall be accomplished.'"

"Oh, well, by the means you mention you have accomplished much—or someone has." Lord Sombrewater thought for a few minutes. He told Ambrose, when later observations had told him a great deal, that he was convinced the ship had been steered by some sort of energy-beam from the shore. Then he decided. It seemed to be his method, at moments in his career when important decisions were before him, to adopt any plan that offered itself. It is probable that he decided on some instinctive summing up of facts, or indications, intuitively perceived. He unreservedly accepted the proposal that the Chinaman should act as guide. "What shall we call him?" he asked.

"Such-a-one," Ambrose suggested.

"Good. I nearly made him minute-writer in your place, Ambrose. I rather fancy him. But we industrial princes can't have people assassinated when they are in the way."

Ambrose considered the point. "I suppose not," he said thoughtfully—"not as a rule. But here nobody would ever know if you waited till we were some way inland. Quentin would do it for you."

Sombrewater laughed loud and long. "You ignore the possibility of any affection a fellow might have for you."

"No, no," replied Ambrose. "I make due allowance for it in my estimation of the probable course of events."

II

Just after sunrise the next day ten figures in the costume of ancient China (on the advice and with the assistance of Such-a-one) embarked in a cluster of odd craft that lay alongside the *Floating Leaf*. Each boat had a windowed cabin, like a gondola. On the sail of each was an emblem like a flying beast. The Dragon, Quentin pointed out.

Lychnis went first, swaying like an amber chrysanthemum on its stalk ; Ruby followed, her plump, maiden curves voluptuously shown, as she balanced, in plum-coloured silk ; Lord Sombrewater in marigold and green ; Sir Richard in apricot, with a device in black like a system of co-ordinates ; Sprot in mauve ; Blackwood in lilac ; Terence in flame-orange ; Quentin in peacock-blue ; Fulke in primrose with sleeves of green ; Ambrose, lastly, in misty white. Clustered in their boats they seemed like flowers in fantastic baskets floating in the stream.

The resentment of the three ladies was soon forgotten in the excitement of the journey. Indeed, it was not long before the sea and the *Floating Leaf* and the thought of their life in Europe seemed to fall under the horizon of the mind, and they saw only the new beauty and strangeness of the country where they found themselves. As Quentin remarked, nowhere else in the world were

such refined harmonies of colour in landscape to be seen or such subtleties of tone. The river wound secretly and intimately deep among the emerald hills, with their dragon crags ; now between lines of willows putting out a mist of silvery grey leaves, a mist deepened here into a tender blue, there into a subtle rose ; now through the delicate umber shadows of some flowery gorge among jade-hued rocks. Here a bridge spanned the river, springing from a group of trees and gracefully completing the rhythm of the valley ; there a village nestled by some profound logic in the nook of a hill ; once and again was some glimpse of the forest, or of the white, slender beam of a rushing cascade that plunged down from distant fells in harmonious passion. Over all floated white clouds like masses of blossom, and it was as if the forces of Nature and the hand of man had united to suggest a landscape-dream of some profoundly meditating, non-human spirit, in which man had his place with the plum-blossom, the torrent and the blackbird on the branch.

They went slowly, by sail and pole, in three boats. Terence, as mystical leader of the expedition, sat in the first beside Such-a-one. Quentin took his morning exercise in the second, thrusting with the bamboo pole, and Frew-Gaff his in the third. They called to one another, startling coot, mallard and teal from the reeds. Ambrose was with Frew-Gaff and the two girls in the third boat. Lychnis and Ruby lay curled up on one side, looking out ; Ambrose on the other.

A shout came over to them from Quentin : " How are the maiden skins ? "

For answer Lychnis clasped the small hands that lay in her sleeves like petals, and Fulke, in another window, was observed trying in vain to catch her eye. Then, at another shout from Quentin, she asked to be put out on the bank, and met him. It was a rice-field, and half a dozen blue-clad labourers were at work there.

" I'm tired of standing still," Quentin observed, strutting and striding in his magnificent robe, a blur of deep blue that gave emphasis to the whole riverside scene.

" So am I," she answered ; " my legs want to run." She picked up her robe, and her green trousers flashed over the field like a pair of parrots. Ruby, who had scrambled ashore after her, followed, and her legs flashed like flamingoes.

" By the Virgin Mother, how beautiful ! " Quentin sang out, and chased them down the rice-field like a great swaying peacock. He caught Lychnis first, as he came up with her among the bamboos, by her streaming hair and forced her head back, so that all her face and throat were exposed to him. She saw the red, smiling lips in the frizzy beard pouting a suggestion of kisses, and turned her face sharply aside. " The unburnt child dreads the fire ! " He grinned his contempt at her and gave a vigorous tug at the handful of amber hair. " Rich, ungathered coral ! Sweet, shadowy, unentered cavern of a mouth ! Unfleshed teeth ! Little tiger that has not yet tasted a man ! Little fool ! "

She stared soberly up at him. "Out of the strong cometh an excess of sweetness, too luscious pomegranate of a man!"

He grinned and led her back, still in captivity, to the boats, annexing the slow Ruby by the way, and as he drove his pair through the field the labourers began to follow and gather in round them, with a kind of singing chatter, like a chorus. Fulke, who was also on the bank, a little shamefaced because he lacked the spontaneity of Quentin and the two girls to run, started forward; but when the little crowd came near the boats, Such-a-one raised his voice to such effect that they sped across the field and vanished like rabbits among the bamboos.

"Odd, that," said Quentin. "What is his secret charm? The authority lay not in the tone, but in the words. Or did he perform a miracle—The Manifestation and Evanishment of the Blue Men?"

"I believe anything, now," Lychnis replied. "Every minute I hope to see that dragon flying across the hills."

Then there was a cry from Terence and a gesture like the waving of a banner.

"He wants to go on," said Quentin. "He's losing sight of his peach-blossom friends."

So the boats began to move slowly ahead, those four, with Ambrose, following along the bank; and at everything Quentin said the girls laughed, encouraging the flow of his spontaneity. Presently they came to a village shadowed among huge rocks and trees. Variegated ducks surrounded them and a flock of geese steadily

testified with outstretched necks to some difficult truth. The village was sombre, mysterious and deserted, but a girl was searching for some object among the pebbles at the water's edge. She looked up, startled, at the approach of five gorgeous strangers like ghostly mandarins and their ladies, and began to make off with little tottering steps.

"Delicious object!" cried Quentin. "Totter, rather, to these arms and the refuge of this beard, which is indeed a better beard than any countryman of yours can produce. For the beard in these parts is scanty," he explained, turning to Ambrose, "as you will undoubtedly record." Then, seizing the girl by the skirt of her jacket, he turned her about and pinched her chin and her yellow cheeks. She screamed. At once from the shadowy houses there was a swift, silent arrival of yellow-skinned relations, and the rest of the party drew together while Quentin, with sparkling eyes and wide smile, faced the crowd. But immediately the voice of Such-a-one came from the leading boat, suavely rising and falling, and once more with mysterious effect, for the gathering dispersed—not, this time, without conveying, through their expressionless faces, some hint of a threat like the threat of geese.

Lord Sombrewater sprang out of his boat. "This is quite enough," he said, with acid authority. "Lychnis! Ruby!" He pointed, and they returned to their window.

"Funny," remarked Quentin to Ambrose. "Your Chinaman has some talisman in his tongue. This will be useful should one of you go too far."

12

Late in the afternoon they disembarked, and Such-a-one led them by a steep road through a village to a solitary inn half-way up the mountain. The moon came up behind the mountain, and soft hues and scents of the spring night stole into the sky.

A warm, stirring silence. The inn slept, and Ambrose kept watch in the road—before him a trembling emptiness of sky, and the fantastic roof of the inn, and a candle burning behind the paper blind. The blind moved, the candle was extinguished, and Lychnis and Ruby leaned out between the bamboo shoots. They threw him down flowers, whispering good-night. Then silence, breathing, scent-laden.

Ambrose was arranging the events of the day in his mind for purposes of record. While his mind worked his eyes were fixed on the moon sailing in a clump of bamboo beyond the inn, like a swan among reeds. His meditations were disturbed, suddenly, by an outbreak of imprecation in his near neighbourhood. It was Fulke. The language he used was like thunder and earthquake among those silent mountains, and seemed to Ambrose to give a distinctly reddish tinge to the sky.

He whistled, and Fulke paused like a nightingale disturbed in his song. Then, with a "That you, Ambrose? My God!" he resumed his theme.

"What is it?" asked Ambrose.

"What is it! I'll tell you, so that you put it down in the records, on parchment, with tender, fragrant little illustrations. What is it! Only this. I asked Lord Sombrewater this evening if I might propose to Lychnis. Lychnis!" He groaned at the name, at the stolen taste of a pleasure never to be his.

"Oh yes?"

"Oh yes! You slug-flesh! You snail-guts! Don't you want to know what he answered?"

"As soon as you wish to tell me, revolutionary but propriety-observing Fulke. I don't know if you wish to tell Lychnis as well. That's her window, you know."

Fulke looked up to her window, and Ambrose saw in the moonlight that his face was all furrowed with desire and despair. He clasped his hands together. "Exquisite—immaculate—goddess-minded," he whispered, and suddenly tore at his hair.

Ambrose drew him off down the road, pondering on the word "immaculate." The demand of the virgin and ineffective for immaculacy—he would have liked to dwell on that, but it did not seem the right moment. "And what did Lord Sombrewater say?" he asked.

"I asked him," said Fulke, dwelling miserably on the scene, "if I might ask Lychnis to marry me, and

he looked at me for about three seconds and said : 'Why, certainly.' "

"I see."

"He summed up my chances in exactly three seconds. 'Certainly,' he said. 'Walk straight in,' as it were. Tell me, you duplicating jelly, is he right?"

"I think so."

"My God! you don't know how it hurts, Ambrose! You don't feel pain or anything like that yourself, do you? But I tell you, I suffer. Make a note of it. Make a note that the infernal fluids that the spring disturbs in the blood are hurrying from end to end of me with messages of desire and love. But don't make the mistake of supposing that I am possessed by mere lust. The sensations of my heart are like the sensations of the opening lilac. I am chaste, and I always have been, and I only desire to worship her, kneeling among spring flowers. She only thinks I am ungainly, I know. But my soul loves all that is pure and virgin and flame-like and verdant and too good and lovely in her for the world. She is just that. She is my Grail, and, in short, chastity is a bloody obsession with me." Wringing Ambrose by the hand, he plunged away.

The moon, Ambrose noted, was now clear of the bamboos, swimming in the shimmering sky-lake. He continued his meditations. It was not long before the sound of a voice singing came to his ears, and presently Quentin arrived, well satisfied with wine and adventure.

He greeted Ambrose mockingly, bowing and shaking himself by the hand.

"A custom I have learnt in the neighbourhood, O moon-souled one."

"Can you tell me why it is," Ambrose asked him, "that a remarkable filthiness of language often goes with an unusual purity of mind?"

"You mean Fulke? These revolutionary, environment-altering, ideal-state-creating people always seem to suffer from a prolonged adolescence, just as your opposite, return-to-nothing, environment-rejecting Buddhist blokes, like Blackwood, seem to have never had any adolescence at all. Early excess, perhaps, in their case; late excess in the other. How terrible, Ambrose, are the results of a wrongly-timed excess!"

"The observation shall be recorded. Don't wake everyone up when you go in."

"I'm not going in. I shall breathe out the wine that's in me and watch Fulke worshipping the narcissus in the early dawn. You can go in. I'll relieve you."

So Ambrose left him, with one last look at the bamboo grove and the floating swan-moon.

13

Days of such journeying followed ; sometimes they went in the boats and sometimes wandered by dizzy paths along the sides of the zigzagging mountains among groves of spruce fir, or high up among pines and slender cascades. The weather was very fair and warm, and the sun was only dimmed by the shadow of the lapis lazuli crags that towered threateningly over the path or by the jade-brown walls of a gorge. At every turn there was some new glimpse of a sun-bathed horizon, or a gleam of the sails of their boats on the shining, enamelled stream. White cranes stalked among the emerald rice-fields. The roofs of villages reposed under the hills, suitably to the contour, and sometimes there were to be seen the quaint eaves of a temple appositely jutting out. And sometimes the glistening cascade fell from their very feet to some green trough in the snowy bloom of cherry, peach and magnolia far below. The spring weather, the exhilarating air of the heights, and a special comradeship that, as Ambrose notes, is apt to accompany such an adventure—at any rate for the first few days—put them all in good spirits with themselves and one another, and the ravines and wrinkled, wizard-faced crags not infrequently echoed with human song. Lychnis usually glided ahead, like a spirit that

seeks the consummation of life in some perfect gesture of the dance, and her attendant followed with a more deliberate and serene enjoyment. Terence came next, officially leading, often in colloquy with Such-a-one; and the rest streamed out behind in ever-changing order, gay in their coloured garments, like a marching troop of flowers.

They camped one warm night, there being no village and no inn, at the mouth of an unusually gloomy ravine, where the mountains, towering above them, seemed almost to meet. The moon was in her third quarter. Three of the Sages—Terence, Frew-Gaff and Sprot—with Ambrose, were standing among the reeds by the water's edge, peering into the mysterious, moon-dappled mouth of the gorge. Terence, profoundly stirred in spirit, had received illumination, and his eyes were deep pools troubled by shining moon-angels. He raised his hands up before the mountains and exclaimed: "The Last Wall!"

"Meaning," said Frew-Gaff, "that on the other side of this barrier, which is to be pierced by means of this gorge, we shall find a sort of Fairyland of Pantomime Peaches?"

"The land of the Peach-blossom People, undoubtedly, matter-dividing Richard."

"Dancing about in pink and purple tights, I suppose."

"And as real as æther waves, fanatic particle-worshipper."

"Well, after all," said Sprot surprisingly, "there

may be something in what Terence says. There are more things in heaven and earth, as Wordsworth reminds us. There is much that we cannot comprehend, and I was never one to scoff at what is beyond our understanding." It was clear, Ambrose saw, that he had something up his sleeve.

"Let me feel your pulse," said Sir Richard. "Ah! I thought so. The spring and the excellent wine we drank at dinner, and something that is no doubt aphrodisiacal in the night itself, have disturbed your blood I detect overtones of moonshine in the vibrations of your nervous system. The sap is stirring in you; you are beginning to Sprot."

"Clever—very clever," replied the little man, with a certain resentment. He would have shown it more positively, but he knew it was better not to engage with these men in a contest of words.

"He has had a vision, perhaps," fluted Terence from the gorge-mouth in deep tones. "Illumination comes oftenest to those who are simple in mind."

"True," observed Sir Richard.

"Not entirely a vision," said Sprot, with a sudden falter. Then he made up his mind. "Look here, you chaps, you mustn't laugh at me for once . . ."

"Go on," said Frew-Gaff.

"How beautiful is the humility of those who have experienced the Experience!" exclaimed Terence.

Sprot pointed a finger. "You see Blackwood up there?"

Following his finger, they dimly saw the motionless form of Blackwood seated cross-legged on a ledge of the mountain. He was in discipline. "Yes," they breathed.

"Well, I was up there talking to him, because I thought he might do me a bit of good, and as we were chatting, about self-control and" (he coughed) "purity and that sort of thing, and it was getting dark, we both distinctly saw a man pass riding on a goat, like the one you saw, Terence, beside the ship. He went down that narrow path very silent and swift, ghost-like; but what got us both a bit startled was his eyes, which were what you might call fierce and majestic, if I might put it so."

Terence took him by the hand, exclaiming, "Brother!" Then once more addressing the mountains as "The Last Wall," he stepped towards the river and said, to some hypothetical listener, "I come."

"Stop!" cried Sprot. Terence, knee-deep in the reedy water, turned with an expression of inquiry.

"There's more than ghosts in these mountains," said the man of business. "Gentlemen, I am not an artist, or a dreamer, or a scientist; I am a practical man, and as such I keep my eyes and ears pretty wide open, and perhaps I see things that escape some others. Now, this fellow Such-a-one, and his talisman, and all the tales we've heard about this part of the world—what do you make of it?" He paused, a conjuror about to produce an idea out of an apparently empty mind.

"Absolutely nothing," said Sir Richard, looking down at him with tolerance in his moonlit, distinguished face.

"Nothing, naturally, it being a matter plain to be seen without a microscope, and hence not interesting to a scientific man. Well, Mr. Poet Fitzgerald, wade into the river by all means, though I might warn you against catching cold. As I said, I am a practical man. But there's something more than a feverish cold hidden in the blackness of that split in the mountains, in my opinion."

He stopped, and the others stared expectantly into the gorge.

"There's dragons," he exclaimed, like an explosion.

"Credo quia absurdum." The voice of Quentin unexpectedly broke the silence, and Sprot jumped round as if his fancies had taken on a fearful reality.

"These mountains are certainly full of dragons," continued Quentin. "Listen!" They listened, and a murmur of rippling water came down the gorge. "Do you not hear them drinking and swimming? Do you not realize that all these past days, as we walked among contorted crags, we were among dragons, twisting and grinning in their sleep? Look above you at those gruesome, moonlit shapes among the mountains, and their light, white breath drifting about the peaks. Look——" He stopped abruptly, and resumed in a queer tone: "Look, in fact, at that one hanging in the air."

They looked and saw a great, beaked bird floating overhead with wide, motionless wings. Their mouths hung open, and Ambrose ascertained afterwards that their sensations were rather of astonishment than alarm. Frew-Gaff was the first to bring his mind to bear on it.

"An aeroplane, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed.

The bird wheeled round a great circle and vanished over the mountains.

"Then what silent engines!" replied Quentin. "I fear it is the Dragon. Remember the emblem on our boats. It is clear that we have come here, by the hand of Such-a-one, in the capacity of sacrifice for some annual feast. Hence the respectful attitude of the surrounding population. Sprot will undoubtedly suffer first."

Sprot was pale, trembling. "The camp!" he muttered. "The girls!"

Taken by his infectious alarm, they rushed back to the camp. All was well. The blue-clad stewards, under the assiduous tutelage of Such-a-one, were prostrating themselves forehead to ground. The others were looking up at the mountains with mingled amusement and apprehension, as if they preferred to believe that someone had played a rather uncanny joke. The girls, by their dishevelled hair, had come from their pillows. This drew Quentin. "A girl fresh from her bed is among the most intoxicating sights of earth," he murmured to Ambrose.

Then Blackwood came flitting through the night

with a not altogether well-disciplined haste, asking: "What is it in the sky?"

The matter was pretty thoroughly discussed, without satisfactory conclusion. "Anyway," said Lord Sombrewater at last, "dragon or aeroplane, the incident adds piquancy to the adventure. What do you say, Lychnis? Would you rather go back?"

She shook her head. "On the contrary."

"And you, Ruby?"

But Ruby had fallen asleep. "What a lovely morsel for sacrifice!" said Quentin, looking down at her.

14

Ambrose's narrative proceeds with the same observant calm ; and it is from the heightened colour of the things he has to describe, and the heightened emotion of the conversation he has to set down, rather than from any deliberately enhanced passion of his language, that we derive our impression of the beauty of the Peach-blossom Valley. He shows us the lagoons, the valleys, the oyster-shaped rocks and the distant mountains, and he describes the reactions of his companions, without intervention of sentimental comment.

It seems that in the misty, serene and summer-promising loveliness of the next daybreak they embarked and entered the gorge almost without waiting for breakfast, undeterred, confirmed even in their resolution, by the disappearance of all the servants, except Such-a-one, who explained that they regarded the manifestation of the Dragon as a warning, and would undoubtedly spread the news, as they returned to their villages, that the whole party had been carried away.

The mists had scarcely lifted from the quivering reeds, and the sky was still all blue and rose, when they poled across the clear black water and entered the gorge. There proved to be nothing formidable or gloomy in

the gorge. It was wide and, when mists lifted, warm sunlight poured down among rock shapes of a dream, throwing queer shadows on the water. Their passage along these fantastic corridors was slow. The sails were useless, and the water was too deep for the pole, so that progress could only be made by the use of paddles and by pushing on the fissures and protuberances of the rock. But it was not easy, for the boats were heavy, and either they were continually bumping on a buttress or coming neatly to rest in an angle, or else one had to paddle against the stream over an open sheet of water, for here and there the gorge widened into a mountain-locked lake, and there were arms of the lake running into green mountain-valleys, and wide bays and beaches bordered with majestic groves of the tall, springing bamboo. There were also dragon-hiding pools under contorted cliffs, black waters and shadowy flights of fish.

They all worked silently with pole and paddle. At last Quentin wiped the sweat off his face and asked : "Who'll swim with me in the Gorge of Dragons ? "

"I will." The voices of Lychnis and Ruby chimed high among the rocks, echoed by Fulke Arnott.

"Wait a minute," put in Lord Sombrewater. "Is it safe, swimming here ? " He addressed Such-a-one.

The Chinaman smiled gravely. "The river is warm and sweet and clear, Excellence. There are few reeds in the channel, and there is nothing more formidable, by day, than pike. These, however, are voracious."

"I'm not frightened of fish," said Lychnis. "I'll kick them." Anticipating her father's consent, she vanished into the interior of her boat, followed by Ruby; and Ambrose remarks that, after the silk robes in which they had for so many days suffered obliteration, the manifestation of their naked limbs and plum-coloured bodies was quite surprising. Soon four of the party were in the river—the two young women, Quentin (whom Ambrose likens to a piece of live rock), and Fulke (who was dragonish). They sported and splashed round the leading boat like water-gods, or swam far ahead, dark little heads and shining arms driving showers of water-drops. Then Lychnis and Ruby, when they were tired of it, played at being hippopotamuses, like children. That was on the suggestion of Lychnis; and Ambrose, leaning out of his window when she plunged, saw her shortened body down under the water, and her pale pretending face, her still eyes, when she floated up through the water to breathe. She was followed by the dim mass of Quentin, who had suddenly appeared beside her from under the boat.

"I nearly had you," he said, spouting water from his mouth. "Drown with me, and let us be drifted into some underwater cave, locked together in a never-ending river-dream." She made a fox-face at him.

The others swam in their turn. After the bathe they had a meal, and some strolled in the groves and some slept in the warmth, and later in the day they went on again, singing, and satisfied with the still splendour of

evening. They spent the night in a creek, among clumps of bamboo.

It was during the following morning that the gorge began to open out, as the mountain range through which they had passed declined into a broken litter of jade-green hills, and they saw ahead of them the first glimpses of the Peach-blossom Valley. They called it the Peach-blossom Valley then because the journey came to an end there, Terence having received the necessary intimation ; but Ambrose tries over some other names, as Willow Valley, and Valley of Emerald Hills, and Valley of Blue Pines. They were so moved, it seems, by the composed beauty of the scene that met their eyes as they left the mild opening of the ravine that for a time they forgot each other's existence and lived alone in the delicate solitude of that dreamy landscape. The stream, deep and slow, wound between willows, and through the willow-screen they saw verdant lawns with a fleeting glimpse of deer. Beyond, there were orchards of cherry, peach and plum, so that the valley seemed full of low-drifting clouds, white and pink ; above the clouds gleamed the smooth emerald of the hills, the blue pines and quaint outcroppings of jade-hued rock. Birds sang. The stream was fed by little tributaries that murmured among the lawns. Tributaries and stream were spanned by bridges of lacquer, and here, among groves of bamboo, was the yellow-tiled roof of a pavilion, and there, sticking up out of the peach-blossom foam, a sunlit pagoda or a porcelain tower ;

and once, on the verandah of a pavilion by the water, they saw a figure seated in meditation, and once an angler under the willows.

"We are in water-colour land," said Quentin. "This valley is done on silk. I fear you others are too gross-minded to subsist here for long."

It was a landscape of unrivalled delicacy and refined distinction, a tone-subtlety of pale pink and blue, amber and apple-green, with harmonious notes of red and, in the hazy sky, of yellow. A soft wind fanned them up-stream. The valley widened continually, and the channel of the stream became lost in the first shimmering stretches of a lagoon. Now on either side they saw other valleys opening out, and beyond them glimpses of frowning pine-wood under azure and jade-brown crags. Azalea flamed on the hill-sides. Ahead of them the arm of the lagoon on which they were sailing was studded with emerald islets, and the oyster-shell rocks rose out of seas of lilies. The hills toppled curiously, and in the strange perspective the distant mountains seemed to zigzag and stagger a little—not, indeed, out of harmony with the general effect of something artificial, composed and deliberately fantastic in a scene which might have proceeded from the mind of a classic artist.

Now they approached a part where the hills came right down to the water, and the lagoon took a right-angled turn between gate-posts of rock, the valley turning with it in its general design. Rounding the rocks on their left-hand, they saw before them a reach of water stretching

away two or three miles, and perhaps a mile wide. This lake also, softly lapping in the all-pervading sunlight, was studded with islets of tender green ; but in the middle of it—as near as they could judge the middle—there stood a greater island of rock, lifted high out of the water, crowned with pine-trees, flower-bearing, afloat, as it seemed, in a water-meadow sewn with a million opening buds of the lotus. The boats drifted unheeded while they all gazed at the tremulous, tender beauty of the scene—lapping water ; island rock in lotus-meadow ; reedy shores ; blossom on emerald hills ; beyond, a hint of snow-capped mountains ; and all poised before them, clear-cut and delicate in a dream-medium of quivering, sun-saturated air.

With one accord they turned to Lychnis, as if to inquire what her thoughts were. Her face had a flush like the tip of the opening lotus. "The Dragon Altar on the Dragon Island," she whispered to Such-a-one, who was observed to be in the doubled-up position of one who makes obeisance.

Nor would he lead them in the boats any nearer the rock.

"I'll swim there," said Quentin. "There'll be lanes through the lotus-meadow."

"I desire you to be good enough to refrain on this occasion." Lord Sombrewater spoke peremptorily.

"Very well," Quentin replied. "I obey. My heart is chastened, for the moment, by the supreme and subtle distinction of the water-colourist who composed

this classic landscape, and there will be opportunities for enterprise at a later date."

"But where are we going to live?" complained Ruby. "We can't live for ever in these boats."

"What does it matter?" asked Lychnis. "I'd like to go on floating for ever among the lotuses, dabbling my hands in the lake, until the world vanished and there was only a single lotus and my contemplation." There was profound passion in her voice, and Blackwood turned to controvert the element of heresy in her point of view. But she woke from reverie and made some inquiries. "This is perhaps the earthly paradise. Can we stay here?" She addressed the Chinaman. "Is this valley for us? May we live in those pavilions and contemplate in those porcelain towers? Oh, Ruby! did you see the verandahs? What a summer we shall have—water-parties and lantern-feasts!"

The black eyes of their guide, unreadable as boot-buttons, regarded her child-like excitement. He bowed. "Nobody will prevent you, in these valleys, from the enjoyment of whatever you may find at your disposal. Let us explore the accommodative facilities."

So they skirted the margin of the water for more than a mile, stealing glances at the mysterious island. They passed many a reedy creek, where carp, great and little, were swimming in hundreds, and green-headed ducks; many a lawn coming down to the water's edge, with willow-tree or small, twisted pine; and at last they came to a mooring raft of bamboo poles. There Such-a-one

made fast, and led his party, in their gay silks, by lawn and tall grove of bamboo toward the tributary valleys. At well-spaced intervals he would indicate some pavilion, designed and placed with regard to the surrounding contours, that was at their disposal, and the party began to drop members at one or other of these. Blackwood chose one by a stream not far from the lake for himself alone. It had a copper-domed summer-house, where he could sit and meditate by the water. Quentin, too, chose to be solitary, in a gorgeous pavilion with a verandah and a pointed roof of yellow and peacock-blue tiles. Next, farther away from the lake, Lord Sombrewater chose an airy and complicated summer pavilion for Lychnis and Ruby, Frew-Gaff, Ambrose and himself. Such-a-one bowed as they entered, saying : " The Pavilion of the Yellow Emperor." This Pavilion, situated among lawns within the crescent of a forest of tall and splendid bamboo, was a puzzle of open verandahs, screens, windows, interior courtyards and little chambers and closets in threes. The massive roof, weighted with curved rows of vermilion tiles, rose from a tangle of upward-curling horns and grotesque monsters to a central and whirling creature that was both dragon and spasm of forked lightning. The furniture was exquisite, and in every room was a shrub or a flower—a lily floating in a cistern or an oleander in a porcelain tub. A faint scent of musk pervaded. The dwelling was provided with half a dozen respectful menservants and three girls. There seemed more,

because they were all alike and always coming and going. The men were taller and finer than those who had left in a hurry at the mouth of the Gorge of Dragons. The girls, as Quentin remarked, were beautiful toys.

Lychnis and Ruby, with Sir Richard Frew-Gaff, vanished, and Ambrose gathered from their voices, now near, now distant, that they were exploring the mazes of the Pavilion. With Lord Sombrewater he accompanied Terence, Fulke and Sprot on a search for further accommodation. Behind the Pavilion, deep in the bamboo-forest, Terence came on a graceful, tile-encased tower like a lighthouse among the bamboo-leaf-spray, and elected to dwell in the topmost watch-chamber. Finally, Sprot, entreating Fulke not to desert him, found a house of lacquer and enamel, like a cabinet for a precious gem. There these two ensconced themselves, neither very satisfied with the other.

Lord Sombrewater and Ambrose returned to the Yellow Emperor's Pavilion, smiling and contented with the graceful fortune that seemed to have befallen them. Lychnis stood at the door in a new robe of heliotrope. A deep sash sheathed her hips, and her father, in his pleasure, put an arm round the slender waist and kissed her. Then, "Where's Such-a-one?" he asked. "There are one or two things we ought to discuss."

But Such-a-one had completely disappeared, so she told him.

"Indeed!" said he, turning his expressionless eyes, with a sharp, bird-movement, on Ambrose.

15

Ambrose emerged from his chamber at the side of the house and looked from the verandah across the quivering bamboo-forest. He was composing his description of the morning's adventure. Somewhere in the neighbourhood he heard the girls chattering, and could not quite locate the sound. Ruby's voice came, calling him, and when he looked round in bewilderment there was laughter. Then a lattice was pushed open at the other end of the verandah, and Ruby put out her head and shoulders. She had on a new jacket of geranium-red, and her copper hair was piled up with combs of tortoise-shell. "Come in and see Licky and me," she said. "There's a door on the verandah round the corner."

He went into their room, making a note of the words "refined elegance" for subsequent use in describing its shape and furniture. There was an effect of green, gold and black; for the walls were green, and the furniture was ebony, with marquetry of brass, tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl. A clear sunlight, tempered by the lattices, showed him all the exquisite appointments. The ebony cupboard, with half-open, gold-enamelled doors, contained a hint of richly coloured clothes, like petals within the sheath. A profusion of silken jackets

was scattered over an ebony and ivory commode, and hung on the handle of a lacquered cabinet and over a screen painted with butterflies. The curtains of an ebony bed, like a houseboat, were drawn, disclosing a heap of garments on the swan-white coverlet. Lychnis was seated on a stool by a window, having her hair brushed (but she had forbidden the use of resin) by a Chinese girl with black-bead eyes and almost imperceptible mouth. At her side was a lacquer table, laden with ivory brushes, jade and tortoiseshell combs, pigment trays in rare porcelain. There was a box with a brass mirror in the lid, and tiny drawers for lip-salve, rouge, powder and pencil for the eyebrows. She had in her slender hands a gilt mirror. She was keeping her head very still, but she put, with her eyebrows, an inquiry as to his state of mind. He indicated satisfaction.

"This is very untidy," he remarked. "How can you be so untidy in this perfectly proportioned chamber?"

"We've been trying on the clothes," said geranium-red Ruby. "It took an awful time to make up our minds. I chose this." She opened her wide, black-bordered sleeves like a red butterfly, and turned on her hips to show him the great black wings of her sash. Her cheeks were flushed a deep crimson with her enjoyment, and he wondered if, with that and the advantage that her magnificent figure got from the half-revealing silk, she did not almost eclipse her slenderer companion. He turned round, with a view to the formation of a considered judgment.

Lychnis, the last golden comb stuck in her hair, stood up, and the wrap that had swathed her shoulders fell to the ground. She, too, had a faint flush, knowing, perhaps, that she was offered for judgment; or had she used, he wondered, a little pigment from the porcelain tray? She turned slowly for him to admire her. She wore a chrysanthemum robe—dusky flowers on a ground of pale amber. Her neck—as Quentin was wont to say, you could break it by clenching the hand—was a crysanthemum stalk. The big bow at the small of her back gathered her robe in and disclosed the slim, womanish swell of her hips that he had so often tried to describe. She raised her robe slightly, to display trousers of some texture crisp and brown, like the petals of the flower. "And these comic shoes." She pointed them, and walked towards him, putting her feet one before the other in tiny steps. "Must we walk like that? Ruby's beautiful when she does it. Am I?"

They were lovely, and friendly, those two young women. He watched them both imitate the swaying and delicate walk of the Chinese girls, up and down the room, while the maid put away the clothes, paying no attention. "You'll turn into Chineses," he warned them.

They both sprang at him with cries of "Never!" and pushed and pulled him from the room and along a corridor just to show what they could do.

But Lychnis abruptly desisted. "Hark! What's that?"

It was a carillon of silver bells pealing in a tower

of porcelain, calling the Sages from their several retreats to a meal in the Yellow Emperor's Pavilion. Lord Sombrewater and Sir Richard Frew-Gaff, clothed respectively in sunset crimson and turquoise-blue, were already seated in a chamber more sumptuous, but not less elegant, than the bedchamber. It was furnished with rich tables, and flowers, and great jars of finest blue-and-white porcelain. The other Sages arriving, changed likewise into robes of the most brilliant hue, refreshment was served in the shape of fragrant tea, with a dish of cooked bamboo shoots and other more doubtful ingredients.

"I shan't examine this," said Quentin. "It smells good, and I'll risk the transformation of my lusts that may result from ingesting the cellular composition of beetles and slugs."

"An insubstantial diet will do you no harm," said Sir Richard. "If I were to drain you of blood and transfuse the sap of a vegetable, it might render your temperament less—shall I say?—ardent."

"Ah, no! You'd find me doting on a cabbage, or in dalliance with a brussels sprout."

"You approve of our surroundings, I take it?" observed Lord Sombrewater.

"We are in the garden of an emperor."

"Shall we stay here? What are the views of the Sages? It is pleasant, certainly, beyond anything I have ever seen; but one or two circumstances are a little mysterious."

"It passes my comprehension," said Sprot, "how anyone owning all this wealth can leave it absolutely unguarded. We may be murdered in our beds any night for the sake of the wealth that's about us. These servants—can you trust them? They're not white men, you know. I kicked one just now, to show who's master here. I've always heard you ought to kick native servants. But, as I was saying, all this wealth and not a keeper, or a policeman, or even a Trespassers-will-be-Prosecuted board."

"It may be the custom of some Europeans to kick native servants," said Lord Sombrewater testily, "but I shall be obliged if, in this case, you will use the extreme politeness they use with us."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. But, if you will excuse me, all this gold and tortoiseshell, and the bric-à-brac—I suppose that's valuable, too—who does it belong to? It must belong to somebody, I suppose. Or do you think we might—er—appropriate . . . as a souvenir, I mean?"

"I don't suppose they'd object to your pinching it," said Fulke. "It's clear there's no capitalist system here."

"Then you will be happy here?" asked Lychnis.

That brought him up short. "Yes, by the split kidneys of St. Sebastian!—thoroughly, frightfully happy!" He added to Ambrose in an undertone: "There's always the Lake."

"As for me," put in Blackwood, "my summer-house down by the Lake is of marble and has a copper dome.

So beautiful are my surroundings that I would readily stay here for ever, because of the exquisite and continuous temptation to the senses. But can these servants not be made to understand that I always have two lumps of sugar in my tea ? "

" Sugar ? " exclaimed Sprot. " What's that got to do with meditation ? "

" It's a stimulant to the intestinal acrobatics," said Quentin. " He rewards his performing vestiges with two lumps of sugar."

" And you, Richard ? " inquired the chairman.

" It seems to me we are committed. True, it is a nuisance to be without any facilities—no instruments, no materials, no laboratory—none to speak of, that is. Yet the place is very pleasant. Not that I am particularly susceptible to natural beauty—— "

" It's not natural," broke in Terence unexpectedly. It was noticed for the first time that he seemed dissatisfied.

" But the air is stimulating, and, as you know, I am something of an optimist—in short, I particularly desire to find out what it is that gives these little grassy mountains that peculiar blue tinge, and the rocks simply shout for examination. Not that I am an expert geologist, of course. Still, one can record some observations. And I would add that I think we shall be at peace here. There is an air of happy serenity that lies on the valley."

" And you, Terence ? "

Terence, in the attitude of Rabindranath Tagore

in meditation, raised his large, grey, poetic eyes. "I confess to a certain disappointment. Dragons are somewhat outside my habit of dreaming, and the Chinese gods are not, on the whole, attractive. I find something bland and pawnbroker-like in their faces——"

"That," put in Blackwood, "is the everlasting calm of those who have learnt to despise the world."

"I find it unheroic and fatuous. Moreover, I dislike the empty and unmeaning classicism of this Gentleman's Park. And these rhododendrons and magnolias—they are so consciously ornamental and Chinese and matter of fact."

"Still," observed Sombrewater, "you would not wish to depart just yet?"

"So long as I am allowed to remain in my tower and commune with the myriad quivering spirits of the bamboo-forest."

"By all means—if we may eat a few from time to time. I take it, then, that it's settled. We remain."

"I shall remain," observed Lychnis, "till all's blue. One need not starve, or stay out in the wet, for there are houses and servants and food everywhere. And I would like to say," she added, with a certain diffidence, "that the matter-of-factness is only apparent. It seems to me, Terence, that it hides something—what shall I say?—almost unbearably passionate, all this classical restraint. Yes, the Pavilion and the little bridges and the landscape and everything else. Those two paintings, for instance—the Flower-Spray. That empty,

palpitating background. It is more than an evening sky. The flowers—don't you think so, daddy?"—she appealed to her father to support her declaration of faith—"the flowers . . . oh, they are more than lovely! There is something moves in them, behind them. Some great artist did that, with the calmness of a poet-painter who has feared beauty and conquered his fear. Then"—she looked round and gathered courage from their attentiveness—"the Geese. Not very romantic, Terence. But the soul of Geese is there, dear plump things! What is it Quentin would say in philosophy? Divested of all accident of appearance. They are whatever it is that is Goose at the perfect moment of evolution. The life of the universe is seen through the Geese in that picture. The painter has not hindered it with some sentimental pre-occupation of his own. Romanticism looks silly beside that sort of reality. I—I did not mean to have said so much. But it said itself. It was strange—those two pictures hypnotized me. Something that is not quite life—more than life; I can't express it—moved in them, and words came to me."

Quentin opened his eyes like a man waking from the illumination of prayer. "O exquisite penetration of unfolding virginity! These are the pure eyes and perfect witness of all-judging Jove, and we have heard a voice from the invisible but all-pervading reality of the universe. Now, I myself formed the same conclusion with regard to the art of China in the days of my purity—that is to say, when I was about thirteen. Some

echo of those far-off days came to me as I studied my dessert-plate. This band of creamy pink enamel. This domestic scene in the centre of the plate. These two girls—what ivory-textured skins ! what lily-petal hands holding the battledores. If the beauty, and by consequence the virtue, of the girls of this valley is anything like so fragile——"

"It is very fine ware," put in Sir Richard. "I would like to understand their process more perfectly. Not that I am an expert in the manufacture of pottery. I wonder, by the way, if these cabinets are unlocked."

"Obviously," replied Quentin, "since there is no capitalist system here and no police. One must lock up things when there are police. There !" He opened a cabinet and brought out a piece of pottery. "By the Virgin Mary ! it lives. The cellular organization of it lives and the integument is warm. It blushes under my fingers like a woman's cheek. We have here all that's most precious in the world, including three maidens." He dug Fulke in the ribs. "Let us explore the mazy building."

He led the party all over the Pavilion, discoursing in every room with infinite learning on some precious object of Chinese art. Before the ebony bed in the girls' bedchamber he stood in an attitude of respectful adoration. Lychnis tactfully withdrew, leading Ruby. He spoke in a low voice : "And they lie there in each other's arms, like shepherdesses in a Boucher. That precious cabinet enshrines them. My poor Fulke !

To have seen, and to have no chance of possessing. But come away from this holy place. It is not for the likes of us." They withdrew, Fulke suppressing a groan.

Finally, in a sort of study, they found a cabinet which contained what appeared to resemble some kind of listening-in apparatus. "Now," said Frew-Gaff, "this is really remarkable."

16

When evening fell, warm and flower-scented, they emerged, in their summer-gorgeous robes, from the vermilion-tiled Pavilion, and filed down towards the Lake. They stood on a lacquer bridge at the head of a creek and looked silently across the sheen of water.

"Look!" whispered Lychnis, "the Rock!"

It seemed to float before them, in a vapour of evening. The middle and upper reaches of the sky were clear and summer-foreboding, but clouds loomed up from behind the mountains beyond the opposite shore, and opened like large summer flowers.

The Sages went down and stood on a lawn by the water under a huge flowering tree of unknown kind. Great petals, coloured deep rose, floated down among them. Lychnis caught one in her hands and inhaled its odour. Her petal-eyelids closed.

Fulke, roaming disconsolately at large, discovered a mooring-stage of red painted bamboo among reeds, and there were two or three richly coloured skiffs, with pointed bows and little masts, tied to it. He leapt on the raft, and there was an outcry of waterfowl among the reeds, loudly disturbing the silence. They listened.

"Shall we go out a little way on the water?" He invited Lychnis huskily.

But Lychnis stood quite still, looking at the Rock.

"You, Ruby?" To make Lychnis envious, perhaps.

"I'd rather stay here," said Ruby, shuddering a little.

Nobody, not even Quentin, responded to his invitation. The evening was so still. Perhaps a faint awe was on their hearts.

The deep colour faded gradually out, and the light died off the lapping water. A fish leapt. Night stole over the valley and fell about the Rock. One by one their hearts misgave them at the experience of beauty. They quailed before the task of mastering it with their souls, and drew away. Lychnis only still gazed, and Ambrose studied her.

"Come, my dearest," said Lord Sombrewater, turning, as he went, to draw her by the arm.

An ecstatic sigh escaped her. She seemed unable to move. Ambrose and her father, and one by one the others, turned to see what held her so fast.

The Rock was ablaze with orange-hued lanterns, as if in the middle of the water a rhododendron bush had suddenly put forth flowers.

"Almighty, and as we hope merciful, God!" Quentin was spontaneously upon his knees.

A rocket crept up the black sky, and twenty dying red suns were extinguished in the Lake. Another and another.

"An extremely ceremonious welcome," muttered Lord Sombrewater. "Who is our host, I wonder?"

"Lavish, to say the least," replied Frew-Gaff.

The display lasted an hour. The culminating device was a vermilion dragon that writhed and grinned high up above the Rock. With that the entertainment abruptly ceased, leaving the night darker.

"How shall we find the way?" asked Ruby, with a quiver in her voice. But two or three servants, with kindly-meant if ghostly foresight, appeared out of nowhere to guide them, and they went their several ways through the spectral groves of bamboo, looking back now and then towards the Lake.

17

Warm-hued lanterns decorated the Pavilion and filled the bedchambers with a dim, wavering and unreal light. Ambrose retired and composed his mind. But outside on the verandah he could hear Lychnis and Ruby whispering and the swish of their robes on the floor.

"I don't like it, Licky darling," said Ruby's voice. "I'm frightened. I don't like our room."

"Well, daddy's next door, and your father is somewhere close by."

"I don't like the place where we are, not by night."

"I do," was the answer. "It's the same valley by night as it was by day. Can't you feel how warm and redolent it is?"

"But it's so strange."

"I love what's strange."

"I feel as if something, someone mysterious, might come and seize us."

"I should like someone mysterious to come and seize me."

"Oh, Lychnis, you are dreadful!"

There was no answer. Then, after a silence, Ruby spoke again in a breathless whisper: "Oh, look! There's somebody under the trees."

A pause.

"Silly! It's only Quentin. How mad of him!"

Lord Sombrewater's voice broke in from somewhere: "Go to bed at once, you two."

Ambrose went out to the verandah in time to see the two silken forms vanish. But he was quite sure that Lychnis turned and waved to the dim figure under the trees. Her eyes shone.

18

Ambrose went down to the lake in the tremulous mists of daybreak. He pushed his way in waist-deep among reeds, noiselessly, to observe the habits of water-fowl.

Presently, without surprise, for she had the same early morning habits as himself, he saw the mist-white figure of Lychnis, with her skirt gathered in her hands, on one of the many little islets of rock scattered along the shore. She was bending forward, parting the water-lily leaves, gazing intently into the depths. He liked to see her once again in her own clothes, unswathed, a slender, air-loving Lychnis.

He whistled. She turned and waved—negatively, as it were—but after a minute she turned round again, and slowly began to make her way back, stepping and leaping and splashing from stone to stone, as if she walked on the water ; and sometimes she swayed and balanced among the broad leaves, herself an unfolding white lily.

She came to him in the reeds and took his hand. "I didn't want to see you at first. I thought it was Fulke or someone. But you looked so funny, waist-deep in the reeds and all thoughtful, and I thought I'd come. Let's go, a long way—at once, in case any

of the others come. I want to go miles this morning, exploring. Shall we ? "

She was enchanting, in her slip of a dress and white stockings and delicate shoes. " How can you run and explore in shoes like those ? " he asked.

" Fast-running things don't have big hooves," she replied.

" Quite true. Come on, then, Fawnsfeet."

" My skirt's not very wide," she said, stepping out. It was a very slight affair, a mere shift, caught in on her right flank, so that the movement of side and hip was seen, to give the eye an unsatiable satisfaction. And one observed the moulding of shoulders and bust, and the young mounds that, as one supposed, a lover should one day cup with his hands and put his lips upon—a thought to make a man such as Quentin swoon. And the torso is incomparable, Ambrose observed to himself.

" I felt I couldn't bear those other clothes any longer," she explained—" except sometimes, to dress up. Ruby, on the other hand, likes them."

" She's asleep ? "

" Fat with it, the pig. She woke up when I was having a bath out of a basin and thanked God that she was not a fool. The basin has a design of willow-trees done on it, and someone fishing. Do you fish ? "

" Indeed, yes. Nothing I like better on a summer or autumn afternoon."

" Well, I'll fish with you. We'll go right to the other end of the Lake by ourselves and fish all the afternoon.

There's some beauties in here. I saw them swimming past the rock I was standing on. It's very deep, too—quite black with depth, and clear—like a black crystal. I sometimes think it looks more interesting under water, among water-plants, than above it. Don't you ? "

They made their way along the shore of the Lake, talking hard and laughing, smelling the water-smell and the early-morning smell. Sometimes they went on lawns, crossing the deep red or bright emerald bridges that spanned the rivulets ; sometimes they trod among pebbles at the water's edge ; and sometimes, where the quaint hills came right down to the Lake, they had to scramble round sheer cliffs, jumping over the deep water from fragment to fragment of broken rock. At one place they had to creep under the bend of a slender, splashing cataract ; at another they passed a man fishing. He took no notice of them.

Gently the air filled with the delicate splendours of the risen sun, and the steep island of rock out in the middle stood clearly to view. A breeze stirred the water.

" When the wind ruffles the Lake it looks like a meadow of snowdrops and violets," said Lychnis. " I don't see a sign of life on the island, do you ? "

" Nothing but the foliage and the flowers."

They had come now to a bay with a lawn shelving to the water. Lychnis stood with her hands behind her, looking seriously at the Rock. " Oh," she exclaimed abruptly, " look at the swans ! "

A noble flotilla, led by a god-like bird with frowning brows, swam royally towards them.

"How they stare!" She seemed fascinated. "Are they so different from us—in their lives, I mean, in their thoughts and feelings? Are we related to swans, Ambrose? I feel that I know them. I think I know them as well as I know people. Ambrose"—she bent her brows on him—"I think I shall ask you questions soon—to-day, perhaps. May I?"

"But yes, my silver birch."

She considered. "Last night, Ambrose, Quentin kissed me!"

"Oh yes?"

She glanced at him, but her eyes were full of her thoughts. "Yes, he kissed me. I went back to him after you'd gone. The night was so strange and exciting. It was full of some promise. The night was full of some dark, passionate flower, waiting to open if I had the secret. I tried."

"And you found it?"

"No; it was nothing to be kissed by Quentin—no more than my father's kiss, or Ruby's, or the peck of a bird—except that his beard was prickly and he smelt a good deal of wine. That's why I must ask you questions. I don't ask for facts. I know facts. I want to know how it can ever become so that they don't obtrude rather unpleasantly on one's consciousness. Do they ever stand out of the way of passion, Ambrose? Is there a desire that burns them all up into nothing?"

He was silent.

"It is possible that you do not know," she said slowly.

"You must give me time, if I am to answer you fully. The subject is important, and wide."

"Do you mean to write me an essay?"

"Not precisely." He, too, considered. "It will take me some little while to arrange the logic, the perspective, of my reply."

"Oh, well; take time over it, if you must. But I'm not often in the mood to ask you things."

"In the meantime, I take it you have been disappointed?"

"I only hope Quentin was as disappointed as I was."

"You won't be ashamed with him? You don't mind meeting him again?"

"But why? After all, I disappointed him. It's for him to be ashamed if he can't do better than that. He got nothing from me but my will to experiment, and I easily made it seem as if he was in fault. He went off feeling ridiculous, I fancy. But look! they're asking for bread."

There was always bread in her pockets. The splendid birds were clustered at the edge of the lawn, and she ran down and fed them, and put her slender white hands among their plumage. The god-like leader dug at her with his beak.

"How he stares! How insolent he is!" she exclaimed. "He pesters me—like Quentin."

She retired a little. The great bird followed, bridling

and opening his wings and frowning on her like a Jupiter. She stood still and taut, fascinated. Suddenly he spread his huge wings about her and laid his scarlet beak on her breast. She stood in his embrace for a moment, with thrown-back head, and his beak moved on the slender stalk of her throat. Then, swiftly and calmly, she disengaged herself and ran to Ambrose. The swan seemed quite crestfallen. "Look! I've disappointed him," she said. "For my part, I prefer him to Quentin, but not very much."

"You are a great mystery, my water-lily," Ambrose replied.

They made their way back along the sides of the hills.

19

Nothing happened for three days. A few of the party found that eventlessness had a faint, queer effect on their nervous systems, and the pervading scent of musk was enervating. The days were a warm monochrome. The fiery procession of the sun across the diagonal of the valley was slow, perceptible and unvaried. One might have been glad to alter it. The profound peace and happiness of the valley became even oppressive, even almost sinister for Sprot. The valley smiled ceaselessly, and, as Quentin said, there is nothing more irritating. At night, Lychnis told Ambrose, Ruby clung to her in some sort of irrational fear. Only Lord Sombrewater remained entirely unaffected. And Lychnis liked it. And Ambrose made observations in his diary.

Then, on the fourth day, there blew up a storm of wind, and the clouds writhed like dragons, and the distant tiger-roar was heard as the wind stroked the cracking forests on the fells.

"What music!" Lychnis listened to her emotions, her brows heavy.

"Mendelssohn only," put in Quentin. "Everything in measure here. None of your devastating German symphonies—not in these parts; even the

storms are civilized—still less your incoherent Irish harps."

"I did really begin to feel," said Terence, "that our environment was unsympathetic. I haven't had a dream, still less a vision, since we came. And I find the Spirits of the Bamboo Forest, though they are undoubtedly present in quivering myriads, more than a trifle hard to elicit. But this is better; this is more hopeful. The wind may bring things. I will therefore retire to my tower, and keep watch for a messenger from one of those many worlds that are undoubtedly interfolded with this. If you would like to share my vigil . . . ?" He turned his great misty eyes upon Lychnis. "I feel it coming upon me that I am to begin a new portrait of you, in those elaborate clothes, with your hair so, formally, but half-hidden in veils of bamboo leaves."

Lychnis declined. She was going out to the forest to hear the great branches cracking, she said. She and Ruby went to their bedroom to put on clothes they could walk in—mediæval hunting-clothes.

"Half-hidden! You always have to keep your subject half-hidden, Terence," mocked Quentin. "Why don't you paint her swimming naked in a mystical bamboo-leaf sea? I should, by heaven! if I were a painter. She wouldn't be hidden! I should swoon, painting her."

"You handle my daughter with your imagination a bit freely, Quentin," observed Lord Sombrewater.

"We are all Sages here, I think," replied Quentin.

"We can all embark on the adventures of conversation, I think, for conversation's sake, without being horrified at what we are compelled to say in artistic justice to our theme. It is true, certainly, that your daughter raises in me exquisite lusts of the imagination. But if I want to marry her in my imagination I may, I take it, without asking her parent's imaginary consent."

"It is a pretty point," said Lord Sombrewater tartly; for, where Lychnis was concerned, even though a Sage, he would have put restrictions on the art of conversation.

The girls came back, dressed for the excursion. "I shall accompany you," he said.

"And I," said Sir Richard.

"And I," said Quentin and Sprot.

"And I," said Fulke, "if I may."

Ambrose, naturally, joined himself to their party, as likely to provide more material for description. They set off, leaving only Blackwood and Terence Fitzgerald behind.

An hour's march, mostly along the course of a stream that ran to the Lake, brought them out of the jewel-like, smooth-surfaced and quaint-conceited scenery, among which the Lotus Lake and the pavilions lay, into scenery of a wilder description. Quentin was walking with Lychnis, Lord Sombrewater and Ambrose.

"Terence should be here," he remarked. "This is unfinished; this is romantic."

"But a bit wizardous," said Lychnis. "You would

scarcely expect to meet one of his fair-haired Lohengrins —not among these oddly twisted pines and misshapen rocks. Some strange, gnarled old man, perhaps, with a staff—some very still old man, with a wrinkled, wicked smile, like a bit of the scenery suddenly living and peering at you."

"The mountain air is very bracing," observed Lord Sombrewater, "and the wind fortifies me exceedingly; but for a man who makes a regular habit of six cigars a day the pace is beginning to tell. So much loose rock about, isn't there?"

"As for me," said Quentin, "I am energy, I am vitality itself. I could tread the mountains flat. When we get up there on the crags I shall breathe in the streaming clouds and blow them out again in your faces. I shall fill my chest with the atmosphere and leave you all gasping for breath. You will entreat me for life, and I shall give it—on terms."

"I don't need air," replied Lychnis. "I subsist on the æther."

"You are the æther," he answered, "or whatever medium there is on which all things are founded. Without you . . ." At this point she deftly skipped out of earshot—or, to be more exact, with Ambrose, nearly out of earshot. "Without you," he continued, to the wild, surrounding forest—"without you we should not subsist at all. There would be neither matter to desire cleavage with you, nor spirit to imagine the immortality of love."

"Your knowledge of the bawdy literature of the Middle Ages is more profound than your physics," interrupted Sir Richard.

"I create my physics, as per necessity, to conform with my imagined world, like God," he retorted.

Sir Richard smiled, in his courteous, grave way. "I confine my observation to the world which has been created by the distinguished colleague whom you mention. I find there traces of the existence of consistency, order, law, and nothing beyond that, but those traces lead me confidently to suppose that in due course we shall find the whole mechanism to fall out pat."

"I see the day coming," said Quentin, "when some mechanico-scientific bloke will pull the universe to pieces just to see if he can reassemble it. I hate you people who are always poking in the works. Everyone does it now. People buy cars. Do they drive them? No. They spread them out on the lawn. Do people listen-in? Never. They muck about with the valves. There is no art; there is only psychoanalysis. We pull up all our flowers nowadays to examine the root-hairs and the system of water-absorption. The wonders of the deep have vanished since we took to dredging the Pacific. There's no universe left; there's only a shedful of spare parts. I am the only child of Nature now living."

"A child, yes," said Sir Richard, "and ungoverned, save by whim. Spontaneous as a jet of spring water, but every wind blows you towards a new quarter. You

are a man without self-direction. You cleave where your desire leads you."

"I was wrong," said Quentin gaily, "when I said that I was the only child of Nature living. Here are a dozen others."

They had come down between overhanging rocks from a considerable height of crag into a glen full of small pines and boulders, and before them stood a great hump of mountain range and wind-tossed forest. On their right hand was a little stony hill with small bushes on it and an arbour, or summer-house. A stream—or, rather, a kind of flowing moat—surrounded it. And in the arbour, or under the bushes, or by the stream were men—men in mandarin robes—engaged, all of them (save two, who were chatting mirthfully by the stream), in a meditation that seemed characterized by an expression of hilarious vacuity. Some had long black moustaches, others scanty white beards. All had their hands folded in their sleeves, and all had a look—a look of youth, that, as Lychnis said, was most unsuitable and monkey-like on their wizened faces.

The party filed by the little mountain of meditation, glancing sideways, but no one of its strange inhabitants took any notice of them at all, even though Sprot went close up and peered at them across the stream (without making any intelligent observation), as if they were inhabitants of the Mappin Terraces.

"Wizards," whispered Lychnis—"or Sages."

"Wizards, Adepts, Rishi," her father replied. "The

sort of thing Blackwood tries to be. Extreme cases of Blackwood."

"I think not," put in Quentin. "Taoists, I fancy, not Buddhists. There are fundamental differences."

"Lunatics, if I may be allowed an opinion," said Sprot—"from the local asylum. Blackwood ought to be with them." He grew warm. "I call it preposterous that grown men should be allowed to sit all day on a rock, grinning. They ought to have something better to do."

"It is unpractical, isn't it?" observed Ruby. "I despise men who don't do something."

"And I simply can't think," said Lychnis, "why anybody ever does anything at all. Because really there are so many reasons against doing things—except, perhaps"—she pondered a little—"the things that bring you new and strange experiences, and those, after all, involve you in disappointment."

Quentin winked at her. "Ætherial Lychnis," he replied. "You will soon be ready to join the gentlemen on the rock. As for me, I have been a man of action—muscular action. I am a motor man. Yet, to have you always near me, I will dissolve my fleshly substance, and consist of a vacancy that meditates on nothing. I'll be no more than a large, empty shirt dreaming on a clothes-line. We'll become sighing winds and mingle our particles. We'll be two doctrines of inaction, inert in one another's arms."

"Always sensual, Quentin," she replied.

By now they were at the edge of the deep forest that clothed the great flanks of the mountain. Out of the forest rose craggy peaks that they did not that day propose to climb. Lord Sombrewater, Sir Richard and Sprot were already spreading the lunch. The wind had died, and they sat in a thicket, listening to the last spasmodic sobs of the gale, and looking out under the leaves that protected them away down the mountain-side and across the glen they had traversed. Far down, one among many fantastic outcroppings and erections of rock, was the little mountain of meditation, and the dozen motionless figures could still be descried. Here were no pavilions or eaves of temples. They had come away, as it occurred to the mind of Ambrose to think, from the civilized and composed harmony of the Peach-blossom Valley to outer spaces undealt with by any ordering mind.

"This is undoubtedly for Terence," said Sir Richard. "This is untidy."

"And what do you think of it all, Fulke?" asked Lychnis.

These were the first words she had spoken to him that day, and he brightened (unreasonably), as if he hoped she might love him, after all. Yet he couldn't agree with her opinions. "I am with Ruby," he said. "Men have no right to lie and dream about abstractions when there is so much ugliness and misery in the world. They ought to be building the New Jerusalem."

"In China's green and pleasant land," observed

Lord Sombrewater. "Well, let 'em. We don't want it in England."

"They'd have a better chance here," retorted Fulke. "There's no capitalist system here that must be destroyed before you can build. What lovely thing did the capitalist system ever produce, I ask?"

"My daughter," suggested Lord Sombrewater. "Very definitely, I think, it produced my daughter."

Fulke ignored that. It was, as Ambrose notes, one of those unfair arguments. "We could make England as lovely as this," he said, "with a little preliminary destruction and the aid of science."

"Sheer, criminal balderdash!" exclaimed Sprot.

"What I can't understand about you builders of superfluous Jerusalems," said Quentin, "is your utter dependence on your surroundings. Now I can be happy in a Houndsditch slum. Where I am, the heavenly city is about me. I am content with what I find. I do not ask to see the distant scene—one step enough for me."

"Don't blaspheme," said Sprot, who was a Christian.

"Ruby thinks it's heaven where it's comfortable and she can sleep," said Lychnis. "Personally, I can't form the least idea what heaven may consist in. It certainly isn't in my heart. It isn't round us here, even —still less if Fulke turns it into a red-villa Jerusalem, or even a marble one. Are those twelve on the little mountain in heaven? A little too wizened for such a place, perhaps. One somehow expects heaven to be

full of beautiful Greeks. And I suppose one expects to be the only woman there. Do you expect to be the only man there, Quentin?"

"I should hope so," he answered, "since I expect to obtain heaven when I . . ." She silenced him with a gesture, but his red lips smiled in his frizzy beard.

"At any rate," she went on, "one will not see western Europeans there, unshaved Polish Jews, cross-looking, mingy English tradesmen. I would like to see a man who didn't look as if he was preoccupied with a corn. Not that I wish to be rude to any of you. I love your sweet, lined, thought-laden, nerve-ridden European faces. But when may I expect to see a face that is all pure beauty? When, Ambrose?"

"I should think you very well might about here," he answered. "The Dragon perhaps. Someone who lives on that rock in the Lotus Lake. Someone who broods on the stupendous forces of Nature out of the heart of repose."

"But Chinese can't be handsome," said Ruby. "They're so fatuous, or else so fierce—and in any case so foreign."

But Lychnis suddenly held up her small orchid-hand enjoining silence A wind came rustling along the forest, and boomed out across the valley like some fabulous dragonish bird. Sprot moved uneasily. "Someone coming," he muttered.

"Terence's goat-rider!" Ruby clung to her father's arm.

He came riding along the edge of the forest, seated on a goat of more than natural size. He drove it with a branch of peach-blossom. His dress was fantastically rich, and he had a little red button in his hat. His face was plump and imperious; his tiny mouth ineffably calm. He turned in his saddle as he rode past, and the dark, slant-slit eyes in his face of dry gold bored into the thicket where they were hidden—terrible eyes, attentive and fierce, like the eyes of the tiger when they shine and are rapt with the mysterious and dreadful forces of Nature.

20

Now Ambrose gives an evening picture—an evening of emerald and fire. They have come back to the Pavilion, the wind has fallen, and Lychnis and Ruby are walking with him in the mazy paths of the bamboo-forest. The walls of bamboo curl over their heads like breakers under a flaring sky, and now and then, at some last fierce puff of the gale, there is a splutter of green foam. Ahead of them are the hills, like rollers darkening and lightening on a horizon of sea. And low down in the west rides the round sun, breaking in upon them through the leaves—inquisitive, unescapable, like the face of the goat-rider. It was Ruby (the red tinge of her hair and the peony colour of her robe making a sharp, exquisite chord with the bamboo green) who made that comparison. She was really restless under the sun's stare. "I thought we should be safe here," she said.

"Safe? Safe from what?" asked Lychnis (in purple and deep violet).

"From that face."

"Oh, I thought you meant safe from . . . from other things. Safe with old Ambrose. Safe, I mean, from the strain of people always pulling at you, attracting you, trying to get you."

"I don't mind that so much. But I didn't like that man on the goat, who looked at us as if he saw some caterpillars on a bush."

"He didn't see us," said Lychnis. "He only knew there was something or someone in the thicket. But you are afraid because if a man like that looked at you closely in the eyes he'd paralyse all your desire for resistance."

Ruby was indignant. Ambrose describes with enjoyment the encounter between a resentful, sunset-headed Titania and a slim, bantering spirit in a purple thundercloud.

"He wouldn't," said Ruby.

"Well, search carefully in your mind and try and tell me exactly why his face frightens you. Reject your first thoughts and tell me precisely."

Ruby sought, as desired. "Well," she said, "his hands are too plump and womanish."

"So, I believe, were Napoleon's. But his hands are not his face. It may be your real reason, but I want to hear more of his face."

"He had an absurd round hat, with fur on it, like Henry the Eighth."

"A little lower and we shall come to his face."

"He had a ridiculous coat on."

"Too low. Mount him."

"And I couldn't see his legs."

"They are important, certainly. But for God's sake tell me about his face!"

"Oh well, then! I don't like a man to have a yellow

skin, and moth-eyebrows, and such a tiny mouth, and a jaw round instead of square, and eyes that look and look without moving."

"I see. Delicate hands and a tiny mouth. Not European, it's true. Not the sort of man who takes you in his grasp and sucks passionate kisses off your mouth, as if he were licking an oyster out of its gape."

"Oh, Licky, you're dreadful! You won't understand. I can't explain. I only mean there's something about him that gives me the shivers."

"Precisely—and deliciously. With a terrific, god-like power that comes of the very calm and delicateness of his face."

"I shall dream of him in the night."

"A calm, shining and awful figure, with a golden skin and slanting eyes, standing over you in a transfiguration; a visitor from some untroubled Nirvana; a being without thoughts, looking with wonder at your thought-troubled face. Not that thought troubles you much, my Juno."

"Oh yes, it does," protested Ruby. "I wonder and wonder—sometimes for hours. But not like you, Licky. You're strange and say funny things."

Lychnis suddenly changed her mood. "That's for Ambrose to put down in his book. Dear Ambrose——" She took his arm and studied his face. He felt her eyes on him like the eyes of a violet. "Ambrose is a little Chinese," she said. "He's calm." Then suddenly: "You can't tell what thoughts are going on behind his

serene, pink forehead. Does he ever give you the shivers, Ruby ? "

" Oh, never ! " cried Ruby.

Then they took him for a walk in the groves of the bamboo, one on each arm, and Lychnis whispered to him : " What terrific nonsense I've been talking ! " They mounted Terence's tower, and purple night stole over the Lotus Lake, and a myriad fireflies flickered over the forest.

21

Next morning there was a council of the Sages. It was very hot, and the Sages lay in chairs on a lawn before the Pavilion.

"The position is as follows," said the chairman. "I have received an invitation, very much resembling a command, to make a ceremonial call, along with the rest of you, upon the Mandarin who inhabits the rock-island in the Lotus Lake. The invitation, or command—one moment, please, Sprot—is written in English, and the Mandarin's name appears to be Lung, or, as he kindly translates, Dragon. The question is, Shall we go? Now, my friend."

"I say, Certainly not," Sprot burst out. "Who is he, that we should obey his commands? I vote we don't go, just to show him we're free, independent Englishmen!"

Quentin whistled a few bars of the National Anthem.

"And in the alternative?" queried Lord Sombrewater.

"Stay here," replied Sprot firmly.

"But that would hardly be courteous."

"Why? They're only Chinese. A lot of dirty, hugger-mugger, gibbering Orientals. But let's go away altogether, if you like. I don't want to stay. A place

like this, where nothing ever happens, gets on my nerves. I want to go back to England and see a good old flaring advertisement of Beecham's Pills. You know where you are, then."

"And supposing," asked Sir Richard, "they won't let us go back?"

"What d'you mean?" Sprot went pale all at once.

Lord Sombrewater's eyes were suddenly on Frew-Gaff. "Will you enlarge that a little, Richard?"

"What I mean is this: One has been sensible ever since we landed of the existence in these parts of somebody with very considerable power. Looking back, one may perhaps see that influence, or power, working even before we landed. And I myself am sensible of a deliberate, forming hand, not only in events, but in our material environment, even in the landscape. More than that—we are living at the generosity of someone who can afford to be very slow and ceremonious in discovering himself. I feel myself that underneath this prodigality of forethought for our comfort there lies an immense sureness, based on power. I feel that it is a kindly power, but it may be otherwise. In any case I am not afraid. I am profoundly interested; and for that reason, as well as for the sake of that high-breeding which I still hope distinguishes some Englishmen, I vote that we accept the invitation, in appropriate terms."

"You express me exactly, Richard," said the chairman, with an abrupt nod—"except that I shall have something to add."

"I think it's very unfair," said Sprot, "to those of us who are uncomfortable in this valley. I do protest most earnestly against my surroundings. Who are our neighbours here? Twelve lunatics who drivel all day on a rock; a most suspicious-looking individual who rides about on a goat, which is contempt of civilization; a flock of gibbering servants; and a person who calls himself Dragon and lives on an island in the middle of a lake. I ask you, Can anybody feel confidence in people who behave like that?"

"What do you think, Quentin?" Sombrewater hoped to extinguish Sprot in the draught of Quentin's eloquence; but Quentin was lazy in the heat, and Europe-sick, and only murmured of some scandalous adventure with a brocaded young lady on a summer's afternoon in Spain (where he was engaged in the sale of electrical goods). She had consented, he remembered, because of a poetical feeling for the warm and indolent splendour of the afternoon, and there was a whole Spanish landscape in her torrid embrace.

"Interesting," said the chairman, "but irrelevant. Terence, I think we can anticipate your views—and yours, Blackwood. Your vote is to remain, I am sure, Fulke?"

"My vote," said Fulke sullenly, "is to stay here, if we must, but to send the girls immediately back to the ship."

"Hear, hear," said Sprot.

"Why?" asked Quentin, stirring.

"Because, in my opinion, as far as one of them is concerned, if she doesn't go away from this valley now she never will. She'll be bewitched, if she isn't already, and go against Nature."

"But how nice for her," said Quentin, "to go against Nature! It will be an experience. That's what we all desire, I presume, and find so difficult to get—experiences, strange experiences. People are so unwilling to lend themselves to experience."

"Ambrose knows what I mean," replied Fulke, still sullen and hang-dog with thwarted passion.

"May we this once invite you to contribute to the debate, Ambrose?" asked the chairman, folding his plump, capable hands and looking down at his papers.

Ambrose replied that as regards both the girls he could vouch that their instincts were infallible for whatever was in accordance with Nature, complex as the reactions of one of them might be and tortuous in working to a conclusion. As regards what might prove to be in accordance with Nature, it was inadvisable to dogmatize.

"Very well, then," said Lord Sombrewater, shooting him a glance. "There is a majority for remaining. And in deciding, myself, to remain, let me say that I accept certain risks, as I may call them. All my life I have taken risks, when I felt within myself a certain compulsion, which was itself, perhaps, born of a hidden knowledge of what the result was bound to be. I have never been wrong. I may be wrong, possibly, this time But do not the indications all point one way, and are

we not really compelled to see this adventure out? We are a band of men who have come together because of a common interest. Business, yes—but as well as that we are seeking something in life. Like all Europeans, we are seekers after something vaguely defined. We find ourselves, suddenly, unexpectedly, in a more than merely other-than-European world. It is a world that so nearly resembles our own world that the subtle differences are the more surprising. It is our world in a slightly distorted mirror. Already some one or two of us find ourselves uncomfortable. There is something in the environment that is not agreeable to our conceptions of what ought to be, or indeed of what is. But I am convinced, with Quentin, that we must not desert this opportunity of experience, be the results what they may, until we have searched it to its last end. We must go on. I propose it."

Ambrose wondered how far Lord Sombrewater, or any of them, would go. Lychnis, he fancied, would outstrip them in searching an experience to the bottom.

There being a majority, the chairman's proposal was adopted, and the meeting broke up. Lord Sombrewater took Ambrose by the arm and walked with him to the red mooring-raft among the reeds by the Lake. "A somewhat obscure speech of yours, Ambrose," he said. "I feel you know my daughter better than I do, and better than any other man ever will. I am her father, and my feelings are strong. One day, no doubt, she will have a lover, and his feelings will presumably be strong too." (He seemed to think it unnecessary, though, that she should

have a lover.) "But you are detached, and the more observant. What were you getting at? To what sort of eventuality did you refer?"

"I have not gone so far in my mind as to formulate an eventuality," Ambrose replied.

"You are an old pike," said Sombrewater. "You never bite and you will never be caught."

22

ARRAYED in harmonious splendours, they floated, next morning, in a crowd of fragile and fantastic boats of red, yellow and black, through lanes of flushed lotuses towards the Rock. Servants paddled them. Here and there an unknown white bird with crimson beak walked sedately on the carpet of leaves, or a green-headed duck dabbled with his bill among the stalks of the water-lilies. The Rock itself, at the distance of half a mile, covered with foliage and flowers, looked as if some lake-dragon, rising from the fathomless bottom, had thrust up the carpet of lilies with his back and fallen asleep on the water.

"It's black and mysterious down there, among the stalks of the lilies," whispered Lychnis. "One would like to be a fish and swim down among oozy roots. It must be wonderful to be a fish and nose about in a reed-world. But aren't they pure, the lotuses? Like the flushing thoughts that sometimes come up from our black insides."

"It is remarkable," observed Quentin from under his canopy, "that a creature with so much in the way of tripes should throw off the dewy cobwebs of imaginations that one so often has."

"Illusions," said Blackwood.

"It's lovely floating on water," said Ruby. "I'm ready to live any number of lives like this, Mr. Blackwood."

He firmly shut his ascetic lips, and his eyelids too (notes Ambrose), shutting them down on the bright summer-morning picture of Lychnis, full length and slender in her floating casket of coral.

"You're not frightened, Ruby?" queried her friend across the separating leaf-carpet.

She shook her head.

But perhaps Lychnis herself was just a little dubious when they came within a hundred yards of the sun-beaten Rock and closely saw its dragon-spine ridge, its burden of pine and fig-tree, and its steep side, with little exquisite summer-houses pat to the colour and design of contour and foliage. And they were all a little silent when, rounding the head of the island, they entered its shadow and paddled under its towering wall. This was on the side of the Lake away from their Pavilion; they were cut off, so to speak, from what they knew.

But the island seemed civilized and friendly enough. The wall of rock, coming up sheer out of the depths of the Lake (one could see great carp and wondrous fish nosing in crannies many feet below), was alive, a wrinkled meditation in stone. Reeds fringed it here and there, foliage hung in cascades from the summit, an arbour or a garden seat stood by some perilous path, under pine, rhododendron or orange-tree. Then, coming to a sheltered bight between two flying and fantastic buttresses

of rock, they saw a flight of steps, gleaming and twisting up the cliff like a devil in anguish, and at the foot of the steps, by the water's edge, the Dragon itself waited courteously on a marble quay to receive them.

The Dragon, a brilliantly coloured bird, resolved itself into three Chinese gentlemen. The first, in pale heliotrope, was very old and bright and clean, with blind eyes, scanty white beard, and a hilarious appearance. The second was a shapeless little dump of a man in mauve, darkly pigmented, with black top-knot, little wisp of black chin-tuft, long slits for eyes, and a general appearance of inspired ugliness. The third, in a richly embroidered robe the colour of a peony stalk, was the goat-rider. He was younger and taller than the others, and now, at close quarters, one saw that the clear, penetrating eyes in the face of dry gold were candid, mild and grave —or so, usually, they seemed ; but at moments they were more difficult to read than the eyes of the hawk or the leopard.

All three received the visitors with smiles and many assurances of welcome, yet also with a certain well-bred air of aloofness—an air that refused to presume on the willingness of the visitors to know them and at the same time esteemed itself at a pretty high price, modestly, as a fine jewel might. A highly civilized trio.

The tall youth stepped forward. Entreating them to mount the stairs (which they did), making also from time to time, in concert with his two companions, gestures expressive of his desire to assist them in the intolerably

steep ascent, he explained that the laughing old gentleman with the scanty white beard was his great-grandfather, Wang Li ; and the ugly, poetical gentleman, named Hsiao Chai, his grandfather. His own name was Yuan Ch'ien. His father was making a pilgrimage.

Arriving at the top of the stairs, he indicated a direction. "Not to weary you," he said, "with the florid and excessive courtesy which is the custom among ourselves, this path leads to my great-grandfather's summer pavilion, where, begging you to excuse the omission of a number of preliminary calls and other formalities, he would desire you to take luncheon."

Adopting the same high-mannered air as their hosts, the party moved forward without remarking to one another on the strangeness of this or that—except Sprot, who loudly whispered to Lord Sombrewater and Ambrose, "Speaks English !"

Lord Sombrewater and Ambrose, who had noticed it for themselves, made no sign of having heard him, and it was disconcerting when Yuan, ten yards away, spoke as if he were answering the thought. "Anticipating," he said, "the surprise which you are bound to feel, I may speak of myself so far as to explain that I have been acquainted with London and many of your European capitals, not to mention the cities of the United States of America. And we have had visitors from England before."

Sprot paled. Where were those visitors now ? In dungeons, perhaps, under the island, or mouldering

on the oozy bed of the Lake. One hoped not to see white skeletons, ominously marred, their parts disposed after some plan other than the usual.

"My knowledge of your customs," continued Yuan, "enables me to be certain that you will pardon what my countrymen and many of my relations might regard as an immoral absence of ceremony. We run our affairs here on lines which are not precisely national, in any sense."

Wang Li and Hsiao signified approval of this last sentiment. Lord Sombrewater observed to the very old man that he considered the surroundings most elegant.

"We are now," replied Wang Li, "almost at that invisible centre on which the unity of the whole depends;" and he smiled in a way that Ambrose at first tentatively describes as imbecile.

The surroundings were indeed elegant. The party had come to the house of the Dragon—not so much a house as a walled village of tasteful, if startling, elegance. It was full, as they afterwards found, of relations ; but now, instead of entering the stout red gates, they proceeded, by a harmonious approach, amid scenery with the character of a contrived design on a dessert-plate, to the summer pavilion of Wang Li.

"This way," said Wang, indicating a complicated geometrical harmony of vermilion lines and arcs, perched among trees, a symphony of red balconies and lemon-yellow roof; and they went up into an airy pavilion like a nest of red straws in the pines, sunny, but mysteriously

cool. It was on the side of the island where they had landed, and a red balcony hung out over the water. Lychnis seated herself there, on the floor.

"The invisible centre of Unity," observed Wang. And here they noticed, looking down avenues of tree-tops, that the landscape surrounding the island and the Lake had changed, in the sense that the secret of its design, hidden from every other view-point, was strikingly revealed. From everywhere else it baffled, and perhaps a little chafed, the mind. From here it ever variously satisfied and rested one. And the more one looked at the Rock itself, the more one was convinced by a volume or surface, a space of yellow or blue tiling, a green and grinning monster, a bending cypress or sophora.

There was no furniture in the room, except a few stools, an affair of ebony and enamel that looked like a smoking table, a musical instrument, or an unknown parlour game, and some jars which Quentin at once recognized as products of the Tang and Ming dynasties—in fact, he identified the signatures, with the applause of old Wang Li. "Though," the old man strangely observed, "the name which can be written down is not the everlasting name."

"That is, of course, true," replied Quentin. But he replied absently, for there came in two exquisite and fragile girls, who, after ceremoniously saluting the company, ran like mice, the one to Lychnis, the other to Ruby, and, squatting beside them, began to chatter softly in a shy and welcoming, if incomprehensible, way.

Then, when the visitors had been allowed time to feast their imaginations on the rhythmic wonders of pavilion and arch, marble pathway and bronze dragon, sweeping terrace and dreaming cedar, that sought their attention at every window (or else, according to their natures, wondered what freak could have made himself responsible for this freakish fantasia of unexpected colour and disconcerting line), a light but sumptuous luncheon of pigeons' eggs floating in soup, braised bamboo-shoots and other things was served, under the direction of a sort of major-domo whose choleric features they at once recognized. Sprot plucked at Lord Sombrewater's gay sleeve and whispered, but Lord Sombrewater shook him off.

"It would scarcely be polite," said Yuan at this point, "to leave you in a state of doubt at what must have appeared to be a remarkable series of coincidences. With the permission of my great-grandfather, I will enter upon some details."

Old Wang Li nodded and assumed an expression of almost idiotic vacancy, murmuring: "That which can be told is not to be compared for excellence with that which cannot be told." The hideous and poetical Hsiao, who had exchanged with Quentin a number of cups of wine, had fallen into an inspired contemplation of half a melon. Yuan, impassive (and was he humble or imperious, smiling or fierce?—Lychnis and Ambrose could not make up their minds), entered upon details.

"The founder of our line, himself a descendant of

the Wu-Lung, or Five Dragons, first lived on this Rock in the time of Huang-ti, the Yellow Emperor. It was about the year 2630 B.C., as you reckon dates in Europe. There are, it is true, discrepancies between the dates given in the Bamboo Books and those given by the majority of Chinese historians. In any case the event was not very recent, and in consequence we are a highly civilized family. At times our influence has been very wide, especially in days when the philosophy of Lao-tzu, which was embraced by my family not long after 600 B.C., has been in the ascendant. At other times our influence has been less, but at no time have we lost possession of this island, owing to a faculty long cherished in the family for devising instruments of considerable ingenuity and precision."

Lychnis laughed almost aloud at the look on Sprot's face—a look of depressed triumph at the justification of a dismal prophecy.

"It was a member of the Dragon family," continued Yuan, "who invented the south-pointing needle, gunpowder, anæsthetics, and the flying chariot. It would be idle to pretend that we have not even now at our disposal matters of still greater ingenuity, so that it has for a long time past been the custom to regard this neighbourhood as one where it is not unreasonable to flatter our quite unexpressed desire to enjoy the pleasures of unmolested contemplation. There have, of course, been those who were rash enough to ignore the tradition. Thus, generation by generation, we have built our

pavilions, set our hand to these valleys and turned them into our pleasure garden, with summer-houses for the use of the visitors who have honoured our possessions by sharing them. And the desires of our visitors are, of course, flattered equally with our own."

Hence the respect accorded to the visitors on their journey. Ambrose received a glance from Lychnis.

"And hasn't anybody ever got away with some of the boodle?" asked Sprot.

"To a very great extent we are unmolested because of the respect which is paid, in this country, to intelligence. And no doubt many suppose that because we spend a great deal of time in apparently idle contemplation no wealth is produced. But visitors have had the curious desire to remove precious articles to their own homes, and they have, as you put it, got away. But that—do I divine the more interior workings of your mind?—was because we did not stop them, as, indeed, why should we?"

"I presume," said Sprot, suddenly going turkey-cock red, "that one has complete liberty of movement here?"

"Until one transgresses the ordinary laws of ceremony," answered Yuan.

"What I mean to say is——" began Sprot.

Lord Sombrewater enjoined silence on him, and exchanged explanatory and understanding glances with Yuan. But Sprot meant to assert himself.

"What I mean to say is, that we are British. The might of the British Empire——"

"If I may anticipate your remarks," said Yuan, "there is, in a sense, no British Empire. There is only myself and a few friends." Lord Sombrewater resumed his attitude of attentive politeness, and Hsiao transferred his inspired contemplation to the other half of the melon.

"No Br——!" began Sprot.

"It is possible that occasion may serve to demonstrate that we have here facilities for the complete destruction of any empire that ever was, except the empire of contemplative activity. But what have we to do with the making or unmaking of empires? It breaks into the day so."

"I take it," said Lord Sombrewater at last, "that you have in your hands discoveries of which you make no use—no industrial use, shall I suggest?"

"Precisely. We use them only for our convenience and for the convenience of visitors—as, for instance, you will, I am sure, agree that our fireworks have an unrivalled variety and brilliance."

"Marvellous!" said Quentin. "I love fireworks."

"And we have done much to improve the weather."

"These discoveries," asked Sir Richard, leaning forward, "are discoveries of physical science?"

"They are what physical science is hoping to discover by tortuous methods of its own. In the West, if I may say so, you seek reality through the examination of appearances, and you have little sense of it. Here we experience reality and are able to reproduce phenomena, as may be desirable."

"Indeed! Very interesting," said Sir Richard, biting his lip. "You have laboratories . . ."

But Fulke burst in: "My God! these people could build the Ideal State in about ten minutes, and they sit here thinking and enjoying themselves."

"Those who think do not enjoy," said Blackwood. "It is in a state of non-thinking that one approaches the final bliss of annihilation."

"Bliss of your big toe!" said old Wang, waking suddenly. The veils fell from his eyes, and one saw that they were used to looking fixedly at things non-human, that they were full of an almost dreadful humour. "In argument on matters of reality," he added quaintly, "there are no rules of courtesy."

"It is not to be thought," said Yuan, "that we dream of Utopias. We contemplate reality, each of us from generation to generation in his own way. We perceive the inward structure of things, and occasionally, when apposite, one of us may bring up a discovery from those profound fishings, in the shape of a picture, a poem, or a mechanical contrivance. There have been men of our family who saw that it would be spontaneous to destroy their surroundings in order to shape them according to a greater perfectness perceived in contemplation. They obeyed their natures, but it usually happens that we pass in due time (as my great-grandfather has passed) beyond all interest in the seen world, and lose ourselves in the experience of what is beneath all appearance, whether of life or death."

"Well," said Lord Sombrewater, "we have already detained you from your contemplative activities long enough for one day. I look forward to many pleasant conversations; and I desire to thank you on behalf of all of us for the very kindly way in which you have looked after our interests for some time past, and for your really lavish provision for our entertainment and comfort."

The company rose. "Oh, but may I ask one question?" said Lychnis, with timidity. The Chinese girls twittered round her, smoothing her clothes. "Did you—I can't help wanting to know—did you actually fetch us here, or have we come of our own free wills?"

There was a certain feeling of embarrassment, but Yuan, who had been regarding her with profound attention, replied: "We were informed of your intention to visit Asia, and since then it has been our most earnest desire that Fate would guide you to this valley."

Lychnis hoped that the rest of their desires in regard to the party would prove convenient, being so difficult to resist. Then aloud: "But supposing you hadn't liked us?"

"We did like you. We allowed ourselves the gratification of studying your very pleasing appearance, and only the laws of politeness prevented us from listening to your elegant conversation."

"You saw us!" cried the Sages.

"Look!" said Yuan, introducing Lychnis to a cabinet in the wall.

She looked in, and swung round at him on her hips. "The *Floating Leaf!* My mother, knitting under the awning! Oh! can you see inside things, too? Or in the dark?" She flushed and frowned, remembering her afternoon with Ambrose under the plum-tree in blossom, when she had given herself to his regard.

"This adds a terror to life," observed Quentin. "It teaches us to be careful."

"One can invent many things when it is appropriate to invent them," said Yuan, "and there are several matters on this Rock that may interest you during your visit to our valley."

"Excellent!" said Lord Sombrewater, and indicated a desire that the boats should be brought. So they were conducted back to the stairway, but not before Hsiao, rising abruptly from his meditation, had executed in three or four sweeps a painting of half a melon.

"What skill!" exclaimed Terence. "What sweeping brushwork! And really, what a significant melon! One would say that it was the most significant object in the universe. It leads the mind out to those half-realized worlds that are interwoven with ours."

"It is merely," said Hsiao Chai, "that I have drawn the reality of the melon. You are a painter, too, I know —a European painter; that is, a painter of superficial appearances."

"As a matter of fact," said Sir Richard, "he paints souls, emanations, auras and things."

"Oh, that!" said Hsiao, with indifference, and they

descended the stairway to the marble quay. They floated off in the little boats down water lanes among the lotuses, and once more the three brilliant and bowing figures resolved themselves into one.

" It is a charming dragon," sang out Quentin to Lychnis ; but she pulled out her jade combs and disappeared in a cascade of hair. " Just as," notes Ambrose, " some slender and savage fairy might vanish in a forest cave to interrogate her thoughts in solitude." For, as she confessed in due course, her mind was entirely taken up with a picture of that still unexplained island, with its marble quay, its writhing staircase, its pavilions, paths and cypresses, its vermilion theorem in some unfamiliar geometry perched up in the trees.

He tells us that there was no doubt in his mind that their journey to the valley had in some way been compelled by that keen-eyed young man, or by his hilarious great-grandparent, but for what object was at present not clear.

23

In due course the visit was returned by the three Chinese gentlemen, who brought with them several beautiful girls. To entertain them, Lord Sombrewater decreed a picnic; so under an enamel sky, blue to apricot, tables were spread on the lawn between the horns of the grove, and echoes of laughter and sprightly conversation quivered among the delicately shimmering clumps of bamboo. Before them an exceedingly up-to-date lawn-mower was cutting green swathes in a carpet of daisies, like a plough driving through the Milky Way. Willow and elm and plane-tree were mirrored in the glassy lake. Everybody was happy—even Blackwood, who enjoyed the opportunity to reject the opportunity of enjoyment. Old Wang Li, wearing the appearance of an aged villager who has for some time lapsed from mental efficiency, laughed much to himself at nothing; but from time to time there issued from his vacuity some startling observation, and terrifying depths of knowledge were sometimes revealed in a sudden lightning that flickered through the veils of his eyes. Hsiao Chai abandoned himself frankly to the pleasures of the table and occasionally to silent contemplation of the landscape. Yuan engaged in

discussion with a certain smiling ardour and charm of youth. But it seemed to Lychnis that he, too, was absent-minded part of the time, even when he discussed. His eyes, she said, were not seeing what was around them. There was a rapt, a heart-chilling look in them, she said, as if they pierced through appearances and contemplated realities that might have been frightening for ordinary people to perceive. Ambrose makes it clear that there was nothing impolite in the behaviour of the three guests. They were self-effacing, unself-conscious and simple, but, watching their patrician faces, one felt oneself to be in the company of great gentlemen. It was beyond their power to obscure themselves. All three were in touch, as inconspicuously as might be managed, with some fountain—in communion, secretly, with some tremendous reality. They had become vehicles for it, and it could not be hidden. With Wang it flowered in unexpected and unreasonable laughter ; with Hsiao in the frown of creative inspiration ; with Yuan in an imperious raptness of gaze. On him also there sat a certain majesty of self-dedication and the fore-knowledge of some difficult paradise.

As the meal progressed, the system of thought that was to be inferred from the talk of the three Chinese gentlemen seemed to the others more and more curiously upside down. But perhaps not to Quentin.

"You are a man to be much admired," said Hsiao at some free remark of his.

"So he is, indeed," said Lord Sombrewater dryly,

"though it has been our experience, on our travels, to hear him referred to less sympathetically."

"That is doubtless because men seek to impose their own ideas of conduct on the rest of mankind," observed Yuan.

"He has discarded purpose," said Hsiao. "He behaves as his impulses dictate."

"I am appreciated," said Quentin.

"He despises," continued Hsiao, "the artificial bonds that check our natural impulses. He has become primitive. He gives rein to his nature. He gratifies it, and this is right, because life is short, and our days should not be occupied with conforming to external practices and submitting our natures to impossible inhibitions. There is only one virtue, and that is to behave according to our natures. Men are remembered not for their virtue or their wickedness, but only for having lived to their full bent. And all is soon enough forgotten. Indulge, therefore, the ear and the eye, the mouth and the belly —indulge the desires of body and mind."

"I am understood," said Quentin.

"It will be observed," put in Yuan, "that Hsiao has halted in the pleasures of sense. He has been caught, like a fly in amber, in the beauty of appearances. He perceives, and indicates to us, the spirit, the underlying reality of Nature, but he permits himself the desires of sense, thus adding to the sum of human emotion. Such a man is not the perfect man."

"I should think not, indeed," said Sprot. "Such a man is most dangerous."

"And what in your view is the perfect man?" asked Lord Sombrewater, with interest.

"The perfect man," replied Yuan, to an accompaniment of profound hilarity on the part of Wang Li, "is without passion, desires nothing and indicates nothing. He has the appearance of a fool and is usually ugly. In speaking I depart from wisdom. In speaking we limit truth. Yet, to come in the neighbourhood of definition, let me say that the perfect man neglects himself and is preserved; forgets himself and is remembered; takes what comes; makes no plans; eats what he likes; sleeps without dreams; wakes without care; breathes deep; conforms to custom, lest he become self-conscious; seems to be of the world while his thoughts are with eternity; uses language while communing in silence with what is beyond language; ignores the distinction between spirit and matter; is neither benevolent nor malevolent, wicked nor good, adding nothing to the sum of human emotion; and, his mind being utterly in repose, he dwells for ever with the unnameable."

"That again," said Quentin, toying with a dish of spiced wild duck, "is me."

"But does not the true Sage calmly await annihilation?" ventured Blackwood.

"The true Sage awaits nothing, calmly or otherwise." It was Wang Li who thought fit to speak. He spoke or kept silence at random, recognizing no rule. "He pays no heed either to becoming or ceasing-to-be. He

rejects distinctions of life or death, remaining as nearly as possible unconscious until, in the course of Nature, he returns to the non-relative—which is not to be described as annihilation."

"Mr. Blackwood is wrong," said Hsiao, with decision, "in rejecting life. One should reject nothing that is in accordance with Nature. And Wang Li is wrong to spend his years in a state of unconsciousness. For even now as he talks to you he is unconscious. He is not even conscious that he is unconscious—otherwise there would be in his mind the shadow of pride, which is a shadow of passion. He is with eternity, and only peripherally speaks. Yuan, I fear, is going the same way. For me, the object of life is enjoyment. One is born and one will die. In between one has life. I do not reject it. I accept it and gratify my senses while they can be gratified. I perceive the unnameable, but one can perceive without embracing. When one has returned to the unnameable one will have no senses. In the meantime, from the point of view of the senses, death is a fact; life's another."

"Neither is a fact," said Wang, his eyes lit with a terrifying gleam of amusement. "There is only one Fact. From it all apparent distinctions derive. In it they disappear."

"Do you mean to say," clamoured Sprot incredulously, "that I . . . Me . . ." (he pointed to himself) "am not a fact?"

"You are as the shadow of a non-existing cloud passing

over a lawn that isn't there," said Quentin, with a wink at Hsiao.

"Did I hear a voice?" asked Wang. "How can I, that am not, hear a voice from nothing?" And Sprot clasped his head in desperation, proving himself to himself by the hardness of his skull.

24

The meal came to an end in a somewhat startling manner, for Wang ceased abruptly from conversation and entered a trance of contemplation, while Hsiao went fast asleep.

"This," said Lord Sombrewater to Ambrose, "is a great compliment. I quite see that it may be regarded as the last gesture of true refinement." He rose, and with Frew-Gaff and Ruby followed Lychnis and Yuan, who were strolling among the paths of the bamboo grove. "I desire to hear more of the conversation of that young man," he remarked.

"I don't believe he is young," said Sprot to Ambrose. "I shouldn't be surprised to find he was a hundred. I don't like these people. Did you ever hear such views? And I think it very wrong to let Lychnis go walking off confidentially like that with a young married man. He's sure to be married. And anyway, he's a foreigner —more than a foreigner. In my opinion a Chinaman's more than foreign—like a frog. You don't suppose" —he came closer to Ambrose—"you don't suppose Lychnis would . . . I mean, a nice young girl wouldn't . . ."

"I should recommend you, as a mental exercise,"

said Ambrose, "to formulate to yourself more precisely what is in your mind. It makes my record of the conversation more precise."

Lord Sombrewater beckoned, and he joined the brilliant figures in the bamboo grove. Yuan was discoursing of the bamboo and Lychnis listening bright-eyed.

"There are many plants here that I have not seen before," said Lord Sombrewater. "They are of a rare beauty."

"We have assisted Nature," said Yuan, smiling.

"How do you propagate? May I ask?"

"In the usual ways—by seed, by division, by cuttings of the base of the culm, by cuttings of rhizomes. Layering is impossible for most of these plants. We create a favourable position for them, and make special soils and dressings."

"The warmth and the sea-mists are helpful, I have no doubt. What about rats and vores?"

"We have exterminated them, except for some that we keep for special purposes."

"They really are very beautiful plants," said Lord Sombrewater, with envy.

"It is most wonderful," replied Yuan, "when all of them over an immense region flower at once."

"And do you find that they die?"

"They disappear."

"Many travellers have agreed that the plants die after flowering."

"How are the plants renewed? My opinion is that

they do not die, after flowering, until they have given off suckers from the roots."

They discussed technical questions of extreme difficulty. Lychnis and Ambrose followed in a world of fluttering green butterflies, peering at spikelet and bract, while Yuan described and demonstrated, until Wang Li and Hsiao were heard calling for their barge.

25

At a suitable interval from their first visit to the Rock they were bidden to a water-picnic, and thereafter with increasing frequency to a luncheon-party, or a supper, or some excursion with various members of the family, male and female, among the intricate and distant windings of the Lake. They were invited into the most interior chambers of the house itself. Lychnis and Ruby made friends of young girls or married women with exquisite names. The depression that some of the party had begun to feel lifted, and there was great gaiety and friendship. Messengers were soon dispensed with, and all their arrangements were made by wireless, once they had learned to use the apparatus discovered in a cabinet on the day of their arrival at the Pavilion. It was, Ambrose reports, a better instrument than any known in Europe, the principle of it, Sir Richard and Fulke agreed, being in advance of European physical knowledge—a thing guessed at, but not grasped. They began to know the coves, shrubberies and summer-houses, and some of the mysteries, of the island ; and they began to see what Sprot and Fulke called the sinister side of their hosts' lives. The weather was wonderful—clear, warm and mellow, with mist in

the morning. Peaches and apricots ripened on the brown flanks of the island, and the two parties spent glorious days and wonderful summer evenings about the Lake and the valleys among those fantastic oyster-shell hills. The only rule that Lord Sombrewater made was that Lychnis and Ruby were on no account to visit the Rock unless accompanied by himself, Sir Richard Frew-Gaff, or Ambrose.

Ambrose found that in one way the task of keeping the record of their activities began to present difficult problems. Wang, Hsiao and Yuan baffled analysis and gave him no confidences. Their characters did not seem to have recognizable springs. Merry old Wang said little and laughed immoderately, smiting his clean, blanched-yellow old head without obvious occasion; his sayings, moreover, usually seemed inappropriate and without sense. Hsiao, who with his top-knot resembled an inspired turnip, drank a great deal and painted divinely. Yuan was perhaps easier to understand. He had a certain candour, almost an impulsiveness; but then, as his great-grandfather said, he had not yet quite learned to cease from activity and return to his centre. He ranged abroad and vanished sometimes for days at a time, while his elders kept to the Lake and the island, and seemed to find great contentment in an almost perpetual motionlessness. He liked to be among mountains and pines. "He persists," Wang said, "in riding among wind-storms and adding to the sum of human emotion." And then

he explained that for countless centuries every generation of the family had produced a Sage. There was always one to whom it came as nature, and in his own generation the mantle had fallen on Yuan. But Yuan had yet much to learn. Ambrose thereupon grasped the situation—Wang was a complete Sage, a perfect or superior man, as they put it. Yuan's father, Sage of another generation, was on a pilgrimage. Hsiao was a side-line. Yuan, the beginner (from the point of view of the Europeans he was already far enough on the way to wisdom), was in training. Like the elders, he would spend hours in the neighbourhood of a flower or a waterfowl—he used courtesy towards flowers and animals—and more than once in her walks Lychnis came upon him wrapped in his meditation, self-unconscious, quite lost to the world. It charmed her.

In another way Ambrose's task became easier, because, as their reactions to their strange circumstances became stronger, and as their troubles increased, the Sages all came with their confidences. Even Ruby had something to say and advice to ask, and Lychnis made him absolutely her conscience and heart.

26

LATE at night, when the moon was up and Ruby and the rest of the household were asleep, Lychnis crept from the curtains of her black, roomy bed, and stole out on the verandah. Ambrose perceived her, standing in the moon like a pink crêpe-de-chine ghost with a white core, her feet together and her hands behind her head, in a lovely, dart-like attitude, as if she were balancing for a flight into the scented, dark heart of the foliage. Waiting a moment to observe accurately the excellent shape of her head, with the hair drawn in to the neck, and to commit to memory certain curves of her bust, which slightly lifted the front of her glimmering shift and purified the soul like a vision of the Grail, he stirred. She turned, smiled, and vanished, returning again with a wrap like a mist about the moon. They sat side by side.

"It is hot, is it not?" she asked.

"I was composing my account of the day," he answered. "I want your impressions."

"Do you record impressions of all of us?" she inquired.

"Most of you, from time to time, tell me things that are of interest."

"Of interest! You have interests, of course. One forgets that."

"Oh yes, I have interests. To record with accuracy the essentials of an episode—that is one of them."

"What an interest! Really, an interest is not very interesting—not so interesting as a passion. You have no passions?"

"They only cloud the vision of clear-eyed desire," he answered—"in fact, they actually prevent attainment."

"I'm afraid I've got a passion," she observed—"a sort of general, unattached passion. If it suddenly fastened on someone the results might be frightful."

"Abeyance it, and give me to-day's impressions."

"Oh, impressions! Well, in the first place, it's hot. Then—I don't quite know what impressions I have. I mean, they may come from inside me. Can one make impressions on oneself?"

"Let's hear."

"Well, I have the idea that life may have some point, after all—that there may be a moment when you can say, Now one has really flowered into a moment of existence between nothing and nothing. I desire to exist, to be—not merely to remain a vague thing, an I, that cannot possess a single experience. One is only the beginning of a being, the material for one."

"True. But you think you may be about to begin to exist. What are the symptoms?"

"I don't quite know. How shall I put it?" She

considered the question in silence. Then: "Would you say there was something unusually splendid and beautiful about the night?"

"Perhaps there is, now you mention it."

"Do you happen to notice anything more than ordinarily intoxicating in the scent of the trees?"

He sniffed. "Perhaps, now you point it out."

"Have you by any chance a sort of feeling that out there in the darkness, in a halo of extreme darkness, there might be some unseen experience that would complete you?"

"Um! I recognize the state of mind you describe as one which is familiar to human beings."

She rose and stepped from the verandah down on to the lawn. Some jewel on her slipper shone in the grass like a glow-worm. He followed and walked beside her.

"Those are my impressions," she said. The moon shone in her eyes through a hank of hair.

"The condition," he lectured, "is the condition of one whose generalized passion, as I think you called it, is about to be attached to an object."

"Oh!" She made a fox-face at him and led the way up a path in the bamboo grove. Presently they were hidden there, and the round moon hung in a deep sky behind a delicate pattern of leaves. "Sultry, is it not?" she continued, and loosened her wrap. She glimmered, in her frail gown, like a firefly or some sort of bamboo-fairy. "I would like . . . it would

be cool. One would bathe in night . . . I might, almost, with only you here." She stood looking at him, as if she really were considering it. Or was there even a mocking? Then "Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed, and shrouded her bosom in her wrap, "do you think Yuan might see us?"

"I fancy he would hardly be looking," Ambrose replied.

"I really did think of doing it," she asserted. "Has my reality-sense gone wrong? It seems quite odd that I should hesitate, with only you here, and in fairy-land. Of course, with others about, reality is different. But you and I live in heaven, don't we? I presume a person will be naked there? So you think the man on the island would not be looking. He does strike one as being a gentleman."

"Does he please you?"

"I find him mysterious. What Ruby dislikes about him, I like—I mean the feeling that a cold and merciless god is looking at you. I wish I could be as unself-conscious as that. It's like being looked at by something impersonal—the wind, the sky. Do you think he is a man? Or some human spirit of the mountains? You do not think him supercilious, do you? Those moth-eyebrows, I mean, and that slanting glance."

"I think his mouth remarkable," said Ambrose.

"Yes. It's so small and innocent and unpitying, like a flower that can't feel, or suffer, or know of its own destruction. A mouth that would look the same

in torture. You can use that, Ambrose." He smiled. "A mouth that he surely never uses to eat or kiss with. Will you use some of these words when you are writing in your diary?"

"Possibly. Do you understand all that he says?"

"What is the difficulty? I don't find it a matter of understanding. I don't have to say to myself, 'What does he mean?' I feel it in my bones."

Ambrose pondered. "Perhaps you have the same means of consciousness as these Chinese." He remembered her remarkable insights.

"Do you suppose I am a Sage?" she asked.

"At any rate," he replied, "you resemble them in certain respects. You are at bottom only interested in what they would call the reality behind the flow of phenomena. You actually do live in constant touch with it, and find it exciting. Nothing else will ever quite give you satisfaction. It is a faculty which men of action lose. If they didn't the flow of phenomena would cease."

She stripped the dark leaves one by one from a bamboo.

"And what about men who record action and inaction with equal dispassion?"

"Oh," he answered, "they also sometimes get in touch with reality, in a mild way. But about Yuan. What does he tell you?"

"He told me that when he has once thoroughly investigated the nature of objects, and understood the identity of all things, he will do as his great-grandfather

wishes—abandon all desire, and wholly give himself up to what he calls the unnameable. But he will go much farther than his great-grandfather, he says. Already he is convinced of the ultimate unreality of the world. He wishes one day to leave the world of relativity, to contemplate Nature in its absolute aspect, and finally to sleep a white and dreamless sleep of the mind, knowing only what is beyond mind. This is what he said, and in this state he won't know his nose from his mouth, and his flesh and bones will be dissolved, and he will drift with the wind, not knowing whether he is the wind itself or a leaf riding on it."

"In old age," said Ambrose, "he will come down to the less picturesque and more human mysticism of his great-grandfather. But first he has, as you say, to put away desire."

"He often does, already," she answered eagerly. "He fasts in heart. It is quite simple, apparently. You only forget there is a you, and when there's no you it can't have desires."

"Quite simple."

"He says it is the more subtle desires, the desires of the intellect, that trouble him."

"No doubt they do. And in other matters he is without passions?"

"As far as I can see. Well—he's not a neuter."

"He has the eye of a man?"

She hesitated. "Of more than a man."

"It has expression in it—warmth, feeling, electricity?"

"I don't know. I cannot say what there is in his eyes. I can only say that they are not dead. They have looked straight at mysterious things, and they are unreadable. All his face is unreadable. He is like rocks and forests. His eyes are the mysterious presences that are among trees. And they slant beautifully."

"And what is your chief feeling about him?"

"If only I could always think of him as a figure on a vase . . ."

She smiled at Ambrose faintly, enigmatically, baffling further inquiry. Strange creature, she seemed to him, neither child nor woman—at any rate half-faery. "I don't dare look at him very close," she concluded. "He's so still, so different. If he came walking by now in a meditation I should shiver. Oh! listen, Ambrose. Someone really is coming!"

Ambrose stepped back into the bamboo thicket, and the shimmering, scented girl shrank in under his arm. There were voices, in English and Chinese—chiefly little exclamations and some laughter. Whoever it was passed on and the voices died out in the forest.

"Quentin," whispered Ambrose, "and some young woman we don't know."

They emerged on the white moonlit lawn, crossed the shadow of a great cedar, and entered the house.

27

One afternoon Lychnis, Ruby, Ambrose, Quentin and Fulke were on the island in company with Wang, Hsiao and Yuan. All were meditative, or sleepy, and they lay about on a little turfy place jutting out from the cliff a few feet above the water. They looked like a handful of orchids. Lychnis lay on her front with her head hanging over the Lake. She was gazing intently at the water, and her hair parted and fell down on either side of her face, leaving the slender neck bare, as if she had been laid on the plank of the guillotine. "How satisfying," muttered Quentin, "to wring that neck!"

Yuan regarded the neck, but no shade of thought or of emotion appeared on his countenance; nor did his fingers tighten.

"What a hateful thing to say!" said Ruby, who neither slept nor meditated, and only lay motionless.

Old Wang, after studying her for some time, had been heard to murmur: "The room has been made empty for the Master, but he does not enter it."

Lychnis was fascinated by the water. She was thinking, if only she could wriggle out of her tunic and trousers, shoulders first, and slide over the cliff

into the Lake and glide neatly among the stems of the water-lilies! To dip the chin first, and the mouth, tentatively, gingerly, in the cold element of a different universe; to bury the eyes, next, in its queer sights; to feel it slide over neck and back and legs; then suddenly to dart through it and surprise the inhabitants, like an unexpected meteor.

"I simply must know what it's like to be a water-creature." A sentence had emerged from the depths of her water-feelings.

"You can," said Yuan, "by entering into subjective relationship with them."

She looked at him as one who balances an infinity of considerations. "No doubt. But how does one enter into subjective relationship with, say, a water-beetle?"

"First," began Yuan, "by forgetting self; then by emptying the mind . . ."

But old Wang interrupted, as if to give the young man instruction on an important matter. "Those who know, say nothing," he observed; "those who say, know nothing."

"But," said Lychnis, "that makes conversation so difficult."

"Why converse?" Wang asked her, with a sardonic grin. "Speak only when compelled, and then reluctantly, and only in the words of the Sages."

"In the meantime," said Yuan, who, in relation to his great-grandfather, was only at the beginning of wisdom, "let us take a walk under the water."

Lychnis lifted her head and glanced round at Ambrose. "Among all those plants? I'm not afraid, but isn't it rather impossible?"

"I'll dive in and save you," said Quentin.

"I don't like you under water," she replied—"a spread-out monster with a dim, waving beard. Besides, I've no costume."

"That is not a thing that matters——" began Yuan.

"Of course not," put in Quentin, with immense approval.

The Chinese gentleman continued: "What I mean is, that we go as we are. It is not a miracle."

The scattered orchids stood up, mystified, and undulated in a gay chain along the paths on the side of the cliffs. Presently Yuan halted at a place where glassy-green steps led down into deep waters between reed-clumps.

"A good place for pike, no doubt," remarked Ambrose.

"You are a fisherman, then?" Yuan suddenly enveloped him, as it were, in an all-seeing gaze, which, while extremely polite, was also extremely inexorable.

"I fish, and meditate, and compose my thoughts." Ambrose returned his gaze with a polite stare which, so Lychnis told him, was beautifully inflexible.

"Then we will fish and meditate together."

"With the greatest pleasure."

The two men bowed, and Yuan led the way down the glassy-green steps. They found themselves entering a roomy, inclined tunnel of some substance so transparent that they seemed to be entering a partition of the water.

One by one they stepped down, taking a last glance, when their eyes came to its level, across the many-leaved surface of the Lake. In a few minutes they were walking in the depths of a forest of stalks where strange creatures loomed. It was very silent, very dim, very still, under that ceiling of flat leaves, or under an open sky of lake-water. Sometimes a flight of small, ghostly fish darted invisibly through the stalk-forest, or suddenly wheeling their sides in a light-beam became a thousand rainbows. Sometimes a beetle-creature struggled up skywards through the water, swimming as if faint for heaven. Or swans swam overhead like June clouds, or thrust their snaky necks down between lilies. A cormorant, breaking the limit of the water into a shiver of crystal, passed them in silent white pursuit of a hurrying fish. And in one region of the brownish-greenish water-universe a solemn carp, opening and shutting his mouth like a machine, took part with myriads of his kind in a mazy, rhythmical, interminable, involuted and apparently purposeful dance.

"Just like human beings," observed Quentin.

"Why do they do that?" asked Lychnis. She and Ruby were walking on either side of Yuan; Fulke was following with despairful, scowling face. "Are they happy?"

"They obey their nature," said Yuan. "According to the doctrine of Hsiao, they are Sages."

"They cannot be Sages," she put in, "because they have never been conscious. To be a Sage means to

have abandoned human consciousness and to have adopted the demeanour of a fish or a vegetable."

But he merely stood with bent head considering the glaucous lairs of the water-world. He was not thinking. He was abandoned, unconscious of self or of any process, to what his eyes saw. He was in relation with the water, the fish, the beetles, through the reality which filled him and them and superseded delimitation. He had ceased to exist. He was no longer separate. But an onlooker would have been struck by his self-possession.

Fulke went close to Lychnis and faint-heartedly touched her. His desire to put his arms round her nearly achieved itself. Distracted by himself and by his desire, he was now without inward resource. Entangled in the inhibitions of self-consciousness, he blushed, stammered, and did not know how to stand or where to put his hands.

Ambrose made notes on the behaviour of all concerned.

"Lychnis." Fulke faltered a whisper.

She gave no sign of having heard.

"Lychnis. I . . . Why won't you talk to me? I could answer your questions. . . . I . . ."

She made no answer.

"I know things, too. I am intelligent. Oh, slime and hell! I hardly know what I'm saying!"

"Yes, yes. You are very intelligent—very nice." She spoke as if half-asleep.

He stumbled back over the damp sand to Ruby.

"Look at her!" he exclaimed. "She's following him. He's drawing her into his own mad world. What can we do, Ruby?"

"I don't know." Ruby was dejected, alarmed. "She's funny. I do wish she wouldn't be. You don't think——" She stopped. "I don't like it much here. It's not a place for people to be. Could I go back? Would they mind?"

"My God!" he answered. "I think I'll come with you. She'll be all right. Ambrose is here. You and I—we are of no use to her." Their eyes met in a perfect orgasm of wretchedness, and they glided off, the two of them, along the tunnel and up out of the water-world into the air and the sun.

Hsiao appeared to be disappointed. He had given himself up to the contemplation of Ruby's torch of red hair that glimmered through the shadows of the stalk-forest. But, instantly dismissing anything so painful as disappointment, he addressed himself to a contemplation of Lychnis. "She has hands like the white opening water-lily," he was understood to say. "They would be cool and fragrant to the mouth, and delicately scented."

Wang Li tapped Ambrose on the shoulder, and pointed at his great-grandson.

"A young man," he said, "not free from the chains of desire."

"Desire?" queried Ambrose.

"Desire. An itch of the mind; the mind still itching to experience, to understand, to know. He

still takes an interest in things. He approaches the matter from the wrong angle. Seek first the kingdom of non-being and the world of appearances will be yours at a later date."

He notices a good deal for an old man who is permanently unconscious, thought Ambrose. Peripherally, no doubt.

As for Lychnis and Yuan, they had gone on ahead. They looked as if they were swimming in a gloom of stalks. One was going now deeper into the Lake, into a pool of shadows, into a treeless, inter-stellar space, lit only by the faint emanation of some distant, strange sun. The empty universe was inhabited by flights of fish, like angels going on heavenly errands, and also by monstrous shapes of fiendish though fish-like aspect.

"If these are the work of God," said Ambrose, "I am hitherto imperfectly acquainted with the full variety of His resources."

"Of God," replied Wang, "by the hand of my great-grandson, Yuan. Some experiments of his."

"I must bring my friend Sprot to see them," said Ambrose, and received a wink of consciousness from the Sage's right eye. Old Wang and his two descendants had a power of divination in the matter of character and motive that was quite extraordinary. From Wang especially there was nothing hidden.

"My great-grandson considers," the old philosopher went on, "that, while he is taking an interest in appearances, a man may as well lend a hand in the temporary

work of evolution, and add, by reason of his conscious artistry, a certain distinction, either of ugliness or beauty, to what sometimes appears to be the product of a bungler working in the dark. It is the function of the artist to give point, to relieve, to dramatize. For example——" He pointed abruptly to a glorious creature that floated past like a sun, raying out veils of splendour, and again to a slender torpedo-shape marvellously adapted for speed. "No doubt also you have remarked the rarity of the birds in these parts, and the perfect colour and shape of the flowers. Yuan's. Nothing but a certain indifference to the scientific point of view on the part of his numerous relations has prevented him from experimenting with the human species."

"I am willing," said Quentin, "to act as his agent, or vehicle, in any experiments he may make with the human species, provided they are of a creative, and not of a merely negative, order."

"How," asked Ambrose, "does he justify his preoccupation with objective existences?"

"He does not justify it," said Wang, with what might have been taken for a great-grandfatherly groan; "he boasts of it. It is a phase, of course. It will pass. In time he will embrace his duty and become a Sage."

"In the meantime," remarked Hsiao, "his activities greatly enhance the amenities of the landscape and multiply the conveniences of life."

Rounding a turn in the tunnel they came on Lychnis and Yuan, who were both gazing upward. High

overhead floated the red hull of a coracle, and on either side of it a paddle, like a web foot, occasionally broke the surface. "Fulke and Ruby, I have no doubt," said Yuan. "Lazy, are they not? Or else urgently discussing something."

"Don't let's bother about them," she replied. "Go on. Tell me more about strange things."

Willingly enough he returned to his subject, and the pair of them sped on, absorbed in whatever theme they were discussing. Or perhaps it was not the theme they enjoyed, but the experience—the experience of sinking through the levels of consciousness and meeting in the deeps where there is no opposition between this and that.

Presently there was a shaft in the tunnel with a spiral stair. This the party ascended, and found themselves in the middle of the Lake. A boat was moored there, and far away among the lotuses was the red craft that had passed over their heads. Old Wang was smiling to himself with abandon, and continued to smile until they landed on the island.

"And the joke?" asked Ambrose politely.

"I laughed to see how easily young trees bend to a breeze. It would not be in accordance with wisdom to resist a main impulse of Nature. Here I am in agreement with Hsiao. This is the doctrine of spontaneity."

"Excellent," replied Ambrose. "But, I take it, if there is any flaw in the spontaneity the result will appear as indecision?"

"You are right," said Wang, with a piercing look.

28

Soon enough there began to be a fuss about Lychnis and Yuan. It appeared that Fulke and Ruby, on their ascent into the familiar world, had taken a red cockle-shell skiff and spent the afternoon floating about the Lake, tasting a certain joy in their common misery. No harm in that. But on landing and returning home to the Pavilion, and on finding it in the sole occupation of Sprot, they had communicated to him their fears. These he received with the liveliest satisfaction, spoke much of the accuracy of his forecasting, and spent the evening stamping up and down in a resolved manner. When the party from the island returned, he drew Quentin aside and significantly questioned him, in the presence of Fulke and Terence, as to the proceedings of the afternoon.

"What are you getting at, Sprotling?" asked Quentin.

"I am going to make representations to Lord Sombre-water. I am going to convince him that it is desirable for us to leave the valley without delay."

Terence lifted up his face and spoke inspired words: "I have a most convincing reason for that. This afternoon, in a dream, I saw the mountains of my native

country, and a picture of the whole party of us eating honey in Innisfree. And there came on me a great impulse to arise and go there, which I would have obeyed at once had not the vision clearly said that the rest of you are to go, too." He stood for a moment looking into the distance, and his grey eyes were undoubtedly alight with the apprehension of something not immediately attainable. "I starve here," he added, "for the sights and the sounds of Europe. I am out of touch with the Other Side. There is no veil of misery to pierce; no heaven to reach, because no hell to reach from."

"The dirt and the poverty," said Quentin, "the factories and the brothels, the advertisements, the bankruptcy courts, the demure women who know the game of love—I agree. I hate this calm, this perfection. What you say is true. There are no arcs here, consequently no perfect rounds to long for."

"Oh for some work to do!" cried Fulke. "A world to redeem from the clutches of industrialism—a State to build—a race to create!"

"I am with you in the last item only," said Quentin, putting out his crisp, curly beard.

"At all events," summed up Sprot with enthusiasm, "we hate this neighbourhood. We are all for returning to the ship. But first, how to get rid of this Chink, this Yuan?"

"I could knife him, if necessary," said Quentin, with a certain genuine earnestness.

"Why not?" asked Sprot. "Nobody would know. It's often done in these Asiatic countries. There are no police here. But first—evidence. Lychnis must be watched."

Fulke swung round. "You damned, newt-livered, beetle-tongued, slug-sticky, crawling miasma! Use Lychnis, will you? Besmirch her reputation because you're unhappy away from your kennel? My God! if I hear her name on your slime-coated tongue one single time again, I'll drag your entrails out through your eye-sockets!"

"He's in a temper," explained Quentin. "He's in love—but hopelessly, I fear."

Fulke looked at him with a light in his eyes like a sullen sunset drowning in a tide of misery. "Oh!" he cried, "you're not capable of love. You're not clean men. And I that am clean am of all of you the most miserable. I hate life!" He broke off, and made for the house. He met Ruby coming out, and once more a circuit of emotion was established between them.

"Where's Lychnis?" she asked, with some anxiety.

The others listened.

"Heaven knows," he answered. "Can't you find her?"

On investigation it turned out that Lychnis had disappeared. There was no sign of her anywhere.

"Where can she be?" asked Ruby, with tears in her voice.

They all stood on the lawn staring over the Lake like men who have lost a vision. Sombrewater and Frew-Gaff, returning late from a geological expedition in the mountains, were met with the intelligence by an almost elated Sprot.

"I knew it," said the little man. "I have warned you, Lord Sombrewater."

Lord Sombrewater turned and stared at him so that he began fumbling with his collar. "You have warned me of what?"

He had nothing to say.

"Be so good as to keep your thoughts to yourself."

Lord Sombrewater went abruptly into the Pavilion.

29

Lychnis, in the meanwhile, was off to the south-west with Yuan in the Dragon. The stars were on fire in heaven ; there was a space of white light about the moon ; far below slid the perfumed forest. She sat behind Yuan in the hollow body of the creature, and he, slung between the wings, bent this way and that, wheeling and dipping his fantastic chariot ; and sometimes, when he had climbed to the peak of the wind, he would fling himself forward, and she would see the dark, rushing world beyond the streak of moon on his shoulders as they swooped on a hundred miles through the night. Then, after a few moments of rest on some hill that loomed up out of the void, a soft purr of his mysterious engine or a beat of the wings and the chariot sprang up and forward like an eagle.

Slung behind him, sometimes touching him, Lychnis felt with her body that Yuan knew the air, knew all the roads, the precipices, the rapids of the air. He behaved as a far-travelling bird would behave, beating along the vast empty ways of the night with repeated crutch-strokes, or spreading out silver wings along the swift surface of a wind. Or, if he wearied, the tiny engine was switched on, and they traversed the sky with

the speed of a meteor. Through him she knew the airways and lent him her movements, balancing and clinging with him on the huge precipice-face of the winds they were climbing, giving herself without shrinking to the fearful descent into a huge, opening nothingness. From time to time she caught a glimpse of his cheek. He threw her back an unsounded word, and she made noiseless answers with her small whispering mouth to his ear. He was intent and still, and his stillness held her, so that in spite of the dark void below she had no fear. Only the wind and the world moved, and they seemed intensely still in the midst of the sky, with their small heads so close.

Time had no meaning, and space twisted and wheeled around them. Soon, very far off, under a slanting beam of the moon, there came, as if the edge of space were advancing toward them, a glimmering of white petals, a flush of sacred lilies floating on the dark pool of the sky, lotuses waving about the feet of some Boddhisatva, for whom the Dragon was bearing on his back a beautiful captive to minister to his contempt of desire. But before the lilies came close, Yuan leant forward, and the dark pool of the world rushed up and engulfed them. The forest streamed up and out like black foam. Yuan hung over it, a silver moth, then brought the breast of the Dragon to the flood of a gleaming river. "The jungle," he whispered.

There was a clamour of wild creatures. It suddenly faded to a far distance.

"They smell a flesh-eater," he murmured.

Around them a circle of silence spread outwards till the distant circumference of howling died. But there was a movement. They seemed to Lychnis to be surrounded by looming shapes, by moving jewelled hands gesturing in darkness. There were movements in the unseen masses of foliage on the banks—swift movements of night hunters, slow movements of ancient creatures. There were long plungings and swirlings in the water. A vapour of heat drifted over them. The river flowed by unseen, and the Dragon held his breast to it like a soul in the flow of time. There were presences. Glancing at Yuan, half-visible, Lychnis found him, now, less than human, or perhaps more. Over the jungle there gleamed those lily petals, and a light from them seemed to illuminate his face. The eyes became oblongs of darkness in a mask of dry gold. The small closed mouth was a carved symbol of eternal serenity. He became a god, and she found him almost intolerably strange.

"Forget your humanness," murmured the mask. It was like a breath of the jungle speaking. "Forget it and know the creatures of the jungle."

They were drifting a little down-stream towards the bank on their right. They were aware of a movement in the reeds, an arrival of concentrated silence. The darkness watched them. Then the reeds waved and parted, and there shone at them two savage emeralds. Lychnis, feeling the beautiful ferocity that crouched

for her, glanced at Yuan, perhaps to see if she could share her experience with him. But he was in combat with the tiger, putting out the fierceness of the tiger, meeting, subduing the hunger that was about to spring. He entered through the deeps of being into the nature of tiger, and in some sort of wrestle in the realm of the tiger's understanding dissipated the desire that sought to satisfy itself on Lychnis's flesh.

They became aware that the knot of silence was resolved. Presently, as if the tiger had spread some kind of intelligence, howling was heard again in the distance, and before long the rim of howling contracted. The forest had forgotten them. They were free in it.

"You are not afraid?" The pale gold mask uttered voice.

"Only a little." But her fear was a fear of the being beside her. All other fear had vanished and survived only in that. "Are you never afraid?" she asked. "Here, or in the sky?"

"The personal I," he answered, "the individual local Yuan, was a mass of fears. But the man I am becoming, the man whose I is vanishing, the god-saturated man, cannot experience fear. The wine-drunken man is not afraid, and if he falls out of the cart he breaks no bones. The god-intoxicated man is not afraid, and if he falls out of the sky all is well."

"I am not god-intoxicated, as far as I know."

"Nevertheless your perceptions are like those of one

who is thus intoxicated. You perceive rhythms that only the heart of the infinite perceives."

"I had not thought I was anything out of the way," she said.

"Will you walk in the jungle under the cloak of my understanding?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" She was instant. How often, at night, one had heard some young man, or some older man, or even an aged man, say: Shall we walk in the wood a little? But this was to re-enter the Garden by night, and walk in Eden with an archangel, or even with the Lord God. Possibly to see the Serpent, and the Tree of Knowledge. Looking at Yuan, to follow him, she asked herself: Are you the Serpent? He was leading her to knowledge, certainly, but not of good and evil, for he had said good and evil are local oppositions; in the unnameable they become one.

He was looking past her, boring into the reeds. She liked the dark, oblong eyes with their gimlet centres of blackness. She liked the imperious line of the cheek.

"We will not land here," he said.

They shot up and sideways, skirting the trees like a dragon-fly; came down presently at a place where wild beasts drank. He made fast there. She had a curious sensation, she told Ambrose, as Yuan helped her down from the machine. It was strange, she said, to put her hand into his foreign hand. (No doubt the being so much with Ambrose, the perpetual comradeship that was between them, had trained her to note things.)

Pleasant? Unpleasant? Not altogether unpleasant. Some slight antipathy, the diarist supposes. Certainly she forgot the sensation at once as they made their way into the darkness, the thrilling terror of the deep forest. She had no objection at all to the envelopment of her person by his cloak of understanding. If she had any sort of antipathy to his flesh, she had none whatever to his mind. He walked the forest like some shepherd of tigers. The snakes and insects let pass one of their kind, startled only by the shadow that followed him, bright-eyed and staring. They were mounting, and presently, when they had crossed the spine of the hill, the ground fell again slightly, only to mount beyond them in wave after wave of forest until the further waves had a white ridge, and far off, gleaming in outer space, were the snow-petals, the sacred lilies of ice.

Lychnis gasped. "I'm not sure—I think I'm afraid. They are so huge, so cold." Fear of the mountains had entered her, and with it a host of other fears. She began to look round anxiously, to shrink. He was her only refuge from fear, and she shrank from him, too. Looking at her, she felt he divined the whole secret of her.

"You are afraid now?" he asked. "It's natural. Fear must come in before it can be cast out. One must be conscious before one is unconscious. Sit down with your back to a tree." He prevented, in some way, her impulse to look down in case a snake was coiled where she was to sit.

She obeyed him. He sat down opposite, with his

back to a tree, and drew from his garment a small sort of flute and played. She found presently, as she listened to his slow, meditative theme, that she had forgotten her fear of the mountains. She began to gaze at them, seeking to become conscious of them, to shape the vague and profound emotion that they gave rise to, and express it. "Eternity," she said. "They are eternal."

"On the contrary," he replied. "In a little while they will have gone, and an ocean perhaps will flow there."

"Then it is I that am eternal, and the mountains made me remember."

"Eternity is in you, but you are not eternal."

Swiftly a thought of old Wang Li came to her mind.

"The truth that can be stated is not truth," she shot at him.

He smiled. "The truth can be played with the flute, though. Listen."

It was so, she thought, hearing something behind the notes he played that was like the mountains, but with no terror. And she saw without shrinking that the glittering eyes of fierce beasts were gazing steadfastly from the darkness, and tenderer creatures were near them. Then a python swayed down his head from the branch of a tree close by, and she put out her orchid-hand and touched the ivory skin. All that she remembered afterwards, for at the time she was not conscious of python, tiger, or deer ; only of that which sounded from Yuan's flute, that sang, as she put it, to itself in her and in the beasts, the intoxicating godhead that remains when ice vanishes,

music is not listened to, and spirit itself has disappeared into nothing.

But afterwards, when the spell of the singing flute had lifted, she came to the conclusion that the experience of sublimity is unnecessarily serious. "I should prefer something suaver," she told Ambrose, "more restrained —the god without the intoxication."

30

Lychnis told Ambrose that the coldness of her reception, when she came back next morning, was a surprise to her. "I was only thinking and thinking of what I had seen and done in the night, of how I felt about Yuan," she said, "and to find all that anger was horrible. There has been a change. Sir Richard frowns at me. Sprot is delighted, the little beast, because he can impute something to me. Fulke hates me. I prefer it. But our party is breaking up, and it is not like it used to be. I can't help it. They have no business to interfere when I am going through with an experience." Her anger rose. "They shall stay here until I have finished with it, or I will stay here alone, or with you. You will never be against me?"

He saw that her mind was in tumult, but by no means altogether because of the trouble she had got into with her father and the others. In any case she had an inextinguishable obstinacy. It appears that she had come back alone across the Lake in a boat, pre-occupied, lovely with the flush of her thoughts, only to find herself when she stepped on shore among grave and resentful faces. Her father was indoors. "Naturally," she said, "he would never question me before all the others. He and

I have always had our quarrels in private." Ruby, too, was indoors.

It was the incredible Sprot, almost dancing with the pleasure of his accusing thoughts, who put the question : " Where have you been ? "

She looked round at Fulke, in her eyes a command that Sprot should die. But there had been a change in Fulke, and he only glowered at her. Quentin answered her appeal with a grin of somewhat resentful amusement. She had therefore to speak for herself :

" Mr. Sprot, I am sorry to learn that you have to leave us."

" What on earth do you mean ? " he stammered. " I am not leaving. Your father has not said so."

" I have said so."

" I won't leave." He squared up. " And what will you do about it ? "

" If I see you anywhere about to-morrow morning I shall ask Yuan to attend to you." She went to the Pavilion, and they all watched her walking with bent head across the lawn. Then they turned to consider the case of Sprot, who was palely protesting that he would in no circumstances go.

" Especially," said Quentin pleasantly, " with the country in its present state, when the traveller is more than likely to meet with robbery and violent outrage."

" I appeal to you." Sprot clasped, as it were, the knees of Sir Richard Frew-Gaff. But Sir Richard politely regretted that he could do nothing, and walked away.

Sprot exploded. "It's perfectly scandalous that hard-working, reasonable-minded men should be at the beck and call of a piece of goods like that! Why does everyone pay so much attention to her, I should like to be told. She doesn't work. She doesn't produce anything. What right has she to say what shall be? Walking off like a sprig of lilac with a 'You clear out!' and all —her and her fat-faced Chink. It's my opinion . . ."

"We don't want your opinion," said Fulke morosely.

"Yes, we do. You run away and weep with your Ruby," said Quentin, with a wink to the rest.

Fulke flared. "You shut up, you stinking mud-pump! I've had just about enough of your interference."

"No naughty temper," said Quentin, and being strong, though a sinner, he immersed young righteousness in the Lake.

A native servant came down with a message that Lord Sombrewater would be glad if Ambrose would step up to the Pavilion. Ambrose therefore left the group on the shore of the Lake, thinking that the harmony of the party was indeed sadly disturbed, and the serene lawns and fine brooding trees disfigured by their quarrelling. Lord Sombrewater was with Lychnis, she moody, he severe. But it was his custom to approach a quarrel with his daughter in a business-like spirit, and he had not allowed the matter to interrupt his eleven o'clock cigar. He motioned Ambrose to a seat by a little lacquer table.

"Good-morning, Ambrose. I want you to know

that there are now no restrictions on my daughter's liberty of movement. She may go where she likes and with whom she likes, and I "— he spoke without bitterness— "I wash my hands of it. I admit that it was foolish to make rules for a daughter who takes as much notice of my wishes as the very solid gate-post of this Pavilion. Facts are facts. She has argued with me, and I think conclusively, that her life is her own. I have fully agreed that her friendship with Yuan is not a matter with which I am closely concerned. We must face the facts, and I see that it is useless to attempt to control her. I want you to convey this to the others. Now, Lychnis, I have done what you asked. Will you kindly leave us?"

"I never said that you do not come closely into my life. You do. I want you to."

He waved her away. Ambrose knew that he would never hear in what terms they had quarrelled. But this dismissal, he perceived, was a retaliation on Lord Sombrewater's part. If she had no place for her father, if she desired to be independent, she should be independent, very much so, and alone; she should feel the cold. Her eyes, Ambrose saw, filled with tears as she went through to her green-and-gold bedroom, and there was no turning on her hips at the door to make a friendly gesture. No doubt she felt that another harbour was closing to her.

"When I made a rule that she should not do this or that, I made a mistake," said his lordship, and his cigar had gone out. "Lychnis makes her own rules as she

goes along. She acts by an inner light, and cannot see why others should have any views on the matter except the views that are so clear to her. No doubt she is right, as maybe we all are, in some deep sense ; but it is hard, when she does these strange things, for those who have merely to watch and trust. I find it difficult, Ambrose. I love my daughter. I am jealous, and find it hard to be shut out from her inner life. If I were in her heart, no doubt I should agree that whatever she did was good. I should know what was going to happen, and I should not now be afraid as to where the necessity under which she doubtless acts might be going to lead her. I am honoured, as one should be, for having created a thing that is useless and beautiful . . . but not, very naturally, by the thing. What do you say ? "

" I say," Ambrose replied, " that this is false sentiment. Love of a father is one thing ; love of someone else is another. You should not be jealous of any kind of love that is not specifically yours to claim. Without jealousy, or, as our Chinese friends would say, without desire, or, as I may qualify it, without the addition of an inappropriate desire to the specific and proper desire of a father, or of a lover, as the case may be, there would exist no clash, or undue passion."

Lord Sombrewater observed him. " You would not permit anything that might occur to alter whatever the relation between you and Lychnis may be ? "

" There is a specific and possibly unique friendship between Lychnis and me which, if I do not allow it to

be disturbed by irrelevant humours, can be left to take care of itself."

"That tells me little."

"Not having been choked by weeds, it has become a thing by itself, with life and a destiny. I have only to keep it pure of irrelevant desires."

"You are an extraordinary man. If you would not mind my asking—if anything were to happen, and we left her here in China, would you miss her? Would you, let us say, be aware of a hiatus?"

"The mind," Ambrose records himself as saying, "is its own place, as the poet so justly says, agreeing with our Chinese friends. Desire perishes, and that which is without desire is immortal."

"I'm hanged if you don't out-Wang old Wang!" Lord Sombrewater relit his cigar. Then he suddenly exploded: "And by God! Ambrose, I agree absolutely with Lychnis about Sprot! Out he shall go!"

It was lucky, Ambrose thought, that there should be someone handy to take off the full torrent of Lord Sombrewater's emotion.

31

Lychnis, when she had given Ambrose an account of her doings, went swiftly in her short white dress under the heavy summer trees to the mooring-raft of red-painted bamboo, unfastened her coracle, and paddled through water lanes among lotuses to the island. She saw Hsiao in an arbour by the water's edge, and waved in a friendly manner, but he was asleep. She brought her coracle to the marble quay, ascended the dragon-staircase, and sped along the ridge of the island, passing old Wang in meditation by a dung-heap. She climbed into the vermilion summer-house among the tree-tops, but Yuan was not there. She went out on to the verandah, and stood looking down over the scarlet rail into the Lake, where golden shapes of fish were passing like half-visible summer clouds. She saw the roof of Hsiao's arbour and his two feet sticking out.

She went into the bare, sun-swept room again, and swung out an instrument from its cupboard. Not familiar with its use, but perceiving the principle of it and the method of adjustment by some scarcely conscious effort, she made the whole countryside disclose itself to her. First of all there appeared in the field of view that dozen of queer philosophers on the rock over towards the mountains ;

next, through too wide an adjustment, a tract of country which she recognized—a little hill near the *Floating Leaf*, with a plum-tree, now in fruit, where she had talked with Ambrose, and Ruby had come back with her arms full of flowers. It was strange that she could hear the leaves rustling. She did not look for the ship. To see those three ladies knitting under the awning would have been to jolt the progress of a dream. She came back to the Peach-blossom Valley, and turned with a gesture of wrath from the spectacle of Sprot in altercation with her father. Then a few moments of growing impatience, until she found Yuan, waist-deep and busy in an enclosed pool at a distant point of the island. She heard the Lake rippling and the wash of water when he moved or plunged his hands in the pool. Breeding experiments, she thought. She had meant to go to him when she should have found him. It was so with her now that she demanded his presence constantly. But he was busy ; he might prefer to be alone. She paused to inquire into her state of mind, realizing that she found it a necessity to be with him, and wondering what that might amount to.

Now that she had found him it did not seem right to watch him. She paced the open rooms and balconies of that airy summer-house, like a slim fly caught in a scarlet cage ; going out to feast her heart on the Lake, now a garden of lilies, white, rose, and golden ; returning to the instrument to see if Yuan was still at work. She opened a cabinet of drawers, found it full of paintings on silk, and idly inspected them. There was a portrait

of a young boy. It was so perfect a work of art, a unity composed of an infinite number of rhythms, that its effect on the mind was hypnotic. The tone was a variety of rich browns touched with a lotus flush of almost unbelievable precision. The young boy was kneeling on a lotus daïs with his hands joined in prayer. The eyebrows were delicate as small painted moths. The tiny mouth was like a flower that will never open and wither, beautiful and small and calm. The eyes were purer than the deep and velvet pansy. Was it a boy, after all, or a girl? She saw in the face a certain severity of saintliness, the signs of a state of mind that she could remember, when she had been, as it were, both boy and girl, with a desire for heaven. But what was solemn and beautiful in the face was a shadow, a foreknowledge, of some predestined renunciation, of some experience circled round with burning flames, seen from afar off, before the thought of pain had meaning. Pondering thus, she realized with a shock that the features were the features of Yuan.

She looked at the image in the long-sight instrument, saw that Yuan was still at work, and returned to the portrait.

Could Hsiao have painted it? Could he have received that sublime inspiration in the stupor of wine? If he could paint a melon, when he was drunk, in a way to disclose cosmical secrets, why not the portrait of a saintly young boy? There was no signature. That was like Hsiao. For him not the painting, but the contemplation in which he conceived it. She understood that. The

painting was a mere discharge, the symbol of an experience fully grasped.

The face was not so much Yuan's as the face of some perfect being, predestined for the bliss of non-existence seen in the vision of an artist. Not so much Yuan's face. With the portrait in her hand she returned to the instrument, and found after a little experimenting that it was possible to deal with the field of view so as to fill it with the image of a small object. She studied the image of Yuan with the shame of Psyche studying the revealed face of the god. There had been a change. The mild face of the boy had become severe, even fierce, from the discipline of contemplation ; in the place of innocence was the calm, unvarying gaze of eyes that have rested on a reality that is neither pure nor impure. She was afraid, as she had been afraid before the mountains, and put the portrait away and swung the instrument back into its cabinet. But first, with a swift mounting of her fear, she saw that Yuan had left his pool, and was coming towards her with his eyes fixed on hers.

He was coming to her. He would be there in a few minutes. He had only been looking at the scarlet nest in the tree-tops, of course, and he could not have descried her figure, where she was. But he would know, and in a rush of passion she hated his insight and his domination ; in her mind she saw his face again, serene and alien. Her flesh shuddered.

Soon he stood between the scarlet posts of the doorway, yellow-brown against a deep blue sky, attentive, impassive.

32

They were alone till the afternoon, when Sir Richard and his daughter, both a trifle constrained, came over to the island with Fulke. The sight of those three restored to Lychnis a sense of reality. In the morning she had been drawn into the realms of Yuan's vast interior life, fascinated, hardly conscious that her identity was submerged. Now in the afternoon, with her friends by, she could look on him as an object, a man with whom she could enter on given relations, regard being had to other considerations, as, for example, his race, her father's wishes, the pull of her home in England. She became happy, contented that she should be in that frame of mind.

There was to be a water-party after sundown, and they spent the afternoon making a promised inspection of some of Yuan's laboratories hidden in the rock. There they saw various matters in their several stages of advancement.

"What funny old frights!" whispered Ruby, when she saw the artificers at work. "I really believe they are the twelve men we saw looking so idiotic on that rock."

And certainly the twelve ancient or middle-aged

gentlemen, who were achieving machines of extreme delicacy out of an apparently vacant stupor, did seem to be the same. For Sir Richard, when he saw the artificers at work, the problem as to how Yuan procured his apparatus was solved. "I wondered whether you sent plans to Europe," he explained.

Yuan smiled. "I do not want to lay Europe in ruins. No. I indicate the nature of my mechanical problems to these friends of mine, and they work out the details in contemplation. They know the inner secrets of platinum and ebonite and wood."

"You are kind to Europe." Sir Richard's upper lip was firm. It is inconvenient that the amateur should know more than the professor, and it was only because of the paramount claims of science that he endeavoured to draw Yuan into a discussion. The two gentlemen talked at great length, while Lychnis listened entranced, and Ruby yawned. But discussion was not easy, because Yuan was dealing in symbols that were entirely strange and in realms of experience where his companion had never been. Some formulæ that he wrote down were excessively pleasing; to Sir Richard they meant as much as the experiences of a mystic, while Lychnis recognized that they were indeed precisely that.

From the laboratories they went to the gardens and hot-houses, full of unfamiliar plants and insects; from the gardens and hot-houses to the breeding-grounds; and it was here that even Sir Richard's scientific mind shrank a little at sight of some of the monsters Yuan had created,

in what seemed an irresponsible way. In particular a frightful cross between an ape and a tiger shocked his moral sense. But Yuan took no pains to justify himself, and only replied that all those who help in the great work of creation will have their jokes from time to time.

Towards evening Yuan left them to make his preparations for the water-party, and Sir Richard sat by the Lake with the two girls pondering deeply on the afternoon's talk. He evidently desired to unburden himself, and found a certain difficulty in speaking to Lychnis, the only possible listener. But in the end, if he was displeased with her, the contents of his mind were too much for him.

"That man could alter the world," he said, turning to her somewhat constrainedly at last. "I do not pretend to be an expert in more than one or two of the sciences we touched on, but I know enough to recognize that what he says is of first-class importance. Do you understand, my dear girl, that he has discovered all we know in physiology by pure contemplation? I would go farther and guess that physiology is no problem to him at all; he simply perceives the nature of the body, and it is my opinion that he will live for ever. There seems practically no nervous expenditure. He avails himself of some sort of cosmical energy and forgets about his own organization, which has become merely the sphere, so to speak, in which the energy I speak of is present. And I don't mind confessing that I am completely baffled in my own branch. He talks, Lychnis, as if he had experienced everything he knows, as if he

actually saw, felt, even heard, physical reality. He proceeds, as it were, from insight; and, really, there doesn't seem to be anything hidden. Odd, if reality should, after all, be something more than a state of affairs in a field of electrical stresses. It is profoundly disconcerting. It is as if the most refined discoveries of science should prove to be familiar to an ape or to an idiot. They are ape-like, these friends of yours, and a trifle idiotic. I am not an anthropologist—not an expert—but I perceive something orangoid in your friends, in the disposition, for example, of the lower limbs horizontally, in the posture of the hands."

Sir Richard, forgetting his constraint, seemed to ask for sympathy; but she was angry with him for his frame of mind towards her, and made only some brief reply.

33

The mood which they all fell into, staring out over the Lake at the warm shadows of evening, was broken by the dip of paddles and the simultaneous arrival, with the party from the Yellow Emperor's Pavilion, of Yuan, Hsiao and Wang, with several slight and exquisite girls. They had a remarkable faculty, those three, of waking from reverie on the tick of an appointment. Lychnis sat and watched as each one, in gorgeous robe of mediæval China, stepped from the dusk of the water, like some mystery of the summer night breaking into flower. Darkness fell swiftly, and an ochre moon rose over the sombre side of the valley. She sat on in silence, white and wraith-like among those shapes of splendour, and they gathered around her, waiting on her will, and there was a consciousness that for all of them for that moment the universe turned about her. Ambrose records that it occurred to Yuan and himself at the same time to announce to her that all was ready, and they stood, the two of them (Yuan in a magnificent robe of deep green, himself in dark amber), looking at one another across her moon-golden head. Ambrose immediately gave place, and stood, so Lychnis afterwards told him, smiling complaisantly at the glimmer of stars that was breaking over the trees.

Soon they were all out on the Lake in a ceremonial barge, towing a cluster of painted boats, and the island became a dark complex in the moonlight, illuminated by the dying reflection of a farewell rocket that shot up from the point. In answer Yuan lit a score of lanterns—orange, violet, and brown—swaying moons that cast unearthly reflections in the Lake. But there was silence among the visitors, a certain uneasiness, because of the relation that had arisen as between Lychnis and Yuan and as between those two and the rest.

But Lord Sombrewater would not permit any breach of etiquette, and presently there was a murmur of talk under the ochre moon as the barge swished slowly through dark red lilies towards the distant sources of the Lake, where they were to picnic by the waterfalls. Two or three of the Chinese girls perched like finches on their favourite, their amusing Quentin, and soon enough there was plenty of laughter at his incomprehensible jokes. Ambrose, sitting beside Frew-Gaff, took opportunity to observe that there was no cause for any reasonable anxiety.

"I suppose Sombrewater is right," replied Sir Richard. "It is not that I suspect Lychnis for a moment of folly, as you know; but in this world we must be ready to hear of strange things. I know it; but really, if we were told, one day, of a marriage with this Oriental (who exerts an extraordinary fascination, I admit), I should have the creeps. I somehow cannot tolerate the thought of a union between an English girl—a girl like Lychnis—and him."

The thoughts that arise in the brain, Ambrose observed to himself, are governed, like economic men, by a master of whom they are not aware.

"I have been compelled to give Ruby the same freedom of movement," added Sir Richard. "She is quite capable, I am sure, of looking after herself. A very sensible girl. We shall have no surprises from her."

"And as to Sprot?" queried Ambrose.

"He refuses to go."

"Lychnis has spoken to Yuan."

"I wonder what Yuan will do."

Ambrose looked at Sprot, who was showing a certain defiant and stupid courage in face of the danger of staying, which he preferred to the danger of going away. Appositely they passed three white pelicans on an islet. They had monstrous beaks, those pelicans, the creation of Yuan. And Ambrose wondered, with Sir Richard, what Yuan would do.

When they came to the waterfalls among the high rocks at the Lake's source the moon was shining into the night-sombre valley, and they disembarked and climbed and spread supper in face of the golden and shadowy scene, and the murmur of their talk was subdued to the steady diapason of the main torrent that poured from the crags, not dissonant with the peace and ordered serenity of the landscape. Nothing moved. Far off the island slept, small and brooding. A spirit of peace fell on them all.

"You are philosophic in great comfort here," observed Lord Sombrewater.

"We are civilized," Yuan mildly replied. "It is not philosophy to evolve noble and consolatory systems, or systems of despair, among misery and ruin. Those who require to perform their meditations among desolations or desert wastes are merely unable to cope with the claims of a domestic environment. Contemplation is an activity that can only be pursued by people who have mastered Nature. It is only then that pure reality can be seen. In all other circumstances thought is conditioned by the actualities of being, and is directed towards the problem of evil or some antithetic good. Here we have so wrought that we are free to take part in the experience of a reality that is, as it were, behind. Our environment does not hinder us; our bodies claim no attention; we forget ourselves; we cease to be, and what is everlasting rushes in to fill the place of what was."

"You seek annihilation," murmured Blackwood.

"Seek your big toe!" replied Wang, going to the root of the matter with characteristic efficiency. Indeed, as he lifted his right eyelid, he seemed to emit a trickle of some elemental force that could have dried up the cataract. "In seeking death, you seek what does not exist."

"Perhaps I have been wrong," sadly admitted Blackwood. "I must seek, I see now, for some deeper life."

"Seek your eyebrows!" retorted Wang. "In seeking life, you seek also what does not exist."

"Then what on earth is a man who is all wrong with the world to do?"

Wang opened him with the blade of insight. "You do not get rid of desire by sitting on it. That is what your thoughts of annihilation are—desire gone to mildew. Only they think in terms of annihilation who are extremely conscious of self. Abandon your methods. Desire neither life nor death, and eat red meat."

"I fear I have sadly misinterpreted the wisdom of the Sages," Blackwood faltered, and actually the moon glowed in a tear on his cheek.

"This is the beginning, and only the beginning, of wisdom," replied Wang. "Retrace your steps, give rein to the passions of a man, and in ten years' time you may take some gentle exercise in self-forgetfulness." With this somewhat paradoxical statement he seemed to close himself to all outside influence, and the spray of the moonlit cascade gradually wetted his old bald head.

"It seems likely," remarked Sir Richard, "that Hsiao will presently be altogether forgetful of his body, since the goblet in his hand contains about a pint and a half of your really very powerful and delicious wine, and that is the third I have seen him consume."

"In the days when Hsiao thought in terms of good and evil, of restraint and excess, he used to be very sick," Yuan replied. "Rid the mind of purely relative distinctions between drunk and sober, and you will not be troubled with the gout."

"Thank you for that recipe," said Quentin.

"Wang Li does not take wine, I notice," said Lord Sombrewater.

"That is because he requires no aids to contemplation."

"Then why does Hsiao take it?" asked Ruby.

"He is an artist, which is a weakness of the will, and he needs some attachment to the illusions of sense."

Lord Sombrewater had been deeply pondering. "It seems to me," he said, "that there is something to be argued for our western habit of life. You here—I do not speak of the mass of your countrymen, who present, if I may say so, the appearance of an immense swarm of toiling insects—you in this valley have abandoned the world to its fate. You have abandoned, so it seems to me, much that makes men specifically men, and you have become the abodes of great impersonal forces. Sometimes when I talk with you I feel I am talking with the night-wind, or the moonlight, or the spraying waterfall. God-intoxicated, you have given up your organisms to be the dwelling-place of the great unknown principle of the universe, and any pleasure, any joy, that is in you, is its."

"Precisely," said Yuan. "Our bodies, to a more or less extent, according to the measure of our renunciation, become temples of godhead. Using your western phraseology, we have come strangely near to Christian doctrine."

"That is so; but my point is that in the West most of us hold that it is the business of man to forget God, to immerse himself, while he is a man, in his no doubt blind and temporary manhood, so that he may work out whatever the purpose of creation was in creating him. It is the duty of man to erect his ego into a god. He

must be immensely conscious of himself and the world, immensely unconscious of the universe. He must be tremendously aware of man and his destiny. In Europe, in America, we have formed the idea of Destiny and Progress."

"And do you progress?" Wang Li suddenly spoke like a voice coming out of the wind.

Lord Sombrewater began to search in his mind for the answer to that question. But, except Frew-Gaff, the others did not await his reply, and wandered off as their fancy directed. Hsiao disappeared. Quentin attached a couple of admiring young girls and drove off Sprot, who tried to accompany him, with lively pictures of his approaching fate. Blackwood retired thoughtfully to a dark corner alone; Terence was listlessly meditating on Yuan's aura; Fulke and Ruby gloomily watched to see what Lychnis would do. But Lychnis only sat with two Chinese girls on the cliff-edge at the side of the torrent, and they were all holding out crystal goblets in their orchid-hands to catch the spray drops. They talked in their own languages and seemed well contented with each other. Fifty feet below them the swaying moons of the barge smote strange colours on the foam of the rapids, and the cluster of small tethered boats streamed and leapt astern. Above them dreamed the motionless Wang Li, with the moon on his scanty white beard.

An hour passed, and Sombrewater and Frew-Gaff were still in conversation with Yuan. Ambrose surveyed the party, and there came to his mind, as he watched

Yuan, the description Lychnis had made to him of eyes that were oblongs of darkness in a mask of dry gold. He sought, too, for an adequate description of the power that lurked in the disposed beauty of that petal-mouth of dark enamel. He traced the effect of power to the absence of muscular compression, of visible will. It was unconscious and placid, like the dark, fathomless Lake, where doubtless men had been drowned. Then suitably to his thoughts came Sprot, with terror-stricken face, scrambling up the rocks, crying out : " Hsiao ! Hsiao the drunken painter ! Hsiao is drowned ! " Wang Li dreamed on.

The visitors gathered together and discussed what Sprot called the fatality in tones of horror or dismay. Sombrewater sadly but efficiently put questions to the witness. " I saw the body bobbing about in the wash under the bank," Sprot averred. " A frightful-looking thing."

" You are quite sure it was . . . our friend Hsiao ? "

" Absolutely. That fearful, black, waving top-knot. It was awful—awful ! "

Presently they turned towards Yuan, who was studying a glistening fern.

" He does not seem to realize . . ." said Lord Sombrewater. " He cannot have understood . . . I had perhaps better speak to him." He approached Yuan. " Yuan, my dear friend, I am afraid we have terrible news. Hsiao has been drowned." Yuan did not look up. " Hsiao is dead."

"Quick and dead are relative terms," responded Yuan. "Hsiao is Hsiao."

"The blow has stunned him," whispered Sprot, and suddenly found the basilisk eye of Yuan upon him.

"You would desire, I gather, that the party should break up?" Yuan inquired.

"But, my God——" began Sprot.

Sombrewater silenced him. "We would naturally not wish to go on merrymaking," he said to Yuan.

Yuan seemed to fall in with their wishes. The party descended the rocks in silence, and boarded the vessel with eyes turned from the bank. Wang Li remained. He was in contemplation, and need not be disturbed, Yuan said. They floated off on the current, Quentin and Terence at the oars.

"Will you not extinguish the lanterns?" asked Lord Sombrewater.

"As you wish," Yuan politely replied.

Lychnis watched. The death of Hsiao did not greatly affect her, she admitted. It was a pity, certainly. In any case death did not seem to be reality to her, and her heart approved Yuan's demeanour. Suddenly a scream rang out, and Ruby pointed hysterically to the hideous floating corpse. With a shudder Lord Sombrewater turned to Yuan. "We must recover him."

"Why?" Yuan asked. He did not seem to be able to understand this preoccupation with a trivial event.

34

The following was compiled by Ambrose after listening to both the girls. At two o'clock in the morning a lamp still burned in their bedroom. Ruby, with a garment in her hand, was being addressed by Lychnis, who still wore her white dress and had not even unbuttoned her shoes.

"Can't you see, little idiot, that death's not important? It isn't real. Neither is life real. Life and death are not real. Something else is, and that something else is in Yuan and in Wang Li, and it goes on and is everywhere, and death doesn't make any difference. Yuan and Wang are dead, too. I mean they are not alive in the way we understand life."

But Ruby was not in an amiable mood. "At any rate," she said savagely, "there's no doubt that we shall go away now from this horrible place."

"Why do you think that?"

"I heard daddy say to your father that he couldn't feel comfortable here again. 'With those cold-blooded freaks,' he said."

"Oh! And did my father agree?"

"I think so. He nodded."

"Well——" Lychnis was aware of an unwonted nervous disturbance, a desire to cry, at the secession and

hostility of her obedient friend. She concealed it. "It's time we were in bed." She stood up, unfastened her dress, and let it slide to the floor, bending meanwhile on Ruby her frowning brows. "We shall stay," she added definitely.

Her anger had usually the effect of reducing Ruby to sulks or submission. To-night she became defiant, and replied, looking at her persecutor with shining, fascinated eyes. (And no wonder, thought Ambrose, as he pictured the slim, contemptuous figure that had the matter of subjugation in hand.)

"You think it's for you to decide, Lychnis. It isn't. We've made up our minds to consider ourselves in future."

"You've been plotting with Fulke, have you?"

Ruby's eyes quivered. "Let me tell you daddy thinks so, too. If we want to go now we shall."

"Not without my permission—and Yuan's."

"Oh, Yuan! Why don't you go to him altogether?"

The words had slipped out, and with the realization of what she had said came the end of her courage.

The reply darted at her was, "Get into bed."

She still had an ounce or two. "I won't!"

"Do you remember last time you said that?"

Ruby remembered a night when a fury who exuded a sort of elemental invincibleness had used a slipper on her until she howled for pain. She did not care for pain

Lychnis slid in beside her, and switched out all the lights in the room except the one that hung in the ebony

ceiling of their bed. "You hate it when that light goes out, don't you?" she asked in a cold voice. "Every night you shake for fear of the strangeness of this house and this valley and the tall, plump-cheeked Yuan with gimlet eyes. When the queer moonlight creeps in through the lattices, as if Yuan were there, flooding us with some cold emanation of his cold, unhuman spirit, you lie and tremble. I am going to put the light out now."

She switched it out with one hand and with the other gave Ruby a pinch. Ruby sat up. "I hate you! Oh, you beast, I hate you!"

"You'd better ask Fulke to do something about it." Lychnis spoke in a ghostly voice.

But all at once Ruby collapsed into her pillow and began violently crying. "Don't—oh, please don't tease me about Fulke!" she sobbed.

Lychnis had an intimation. "What's the matter?"

For some time there was no answer; then a buried voice came from the pillow: "I can't bear you to speak of him." A silence. Then: "I—I want him. I love him."

Lychnis peered into the dim moonlight, silent for a little. Then: "But, my dear, I didn't realize it was like that. I am surprised." She put her arms round Ruby. "Since when?"

There followed long confidences and comfortings. "And that's why," concluded the afflicted one, "I said I hate you. I've been hating you a long time—because you keep him from me!"

Lychnis smiled in the dark. "But don't you see? That's nearly over. You will have him from me altogether—very soon."

"Do you really think so?" Consoled, glowing, and happily doubtful, Ruby fell asleep. When she was asleep Lychnis turned over on her face and sobbed her heart out. She saw clearly that Ruby would soon have Fulke—the chimpanzee-like Fulke—away from her altogether. She didn't mind that. But it gave her a sense of desertion. It was strange that soon Fulke should lie in her place, or take Ruby to his. She would be alone. It was the case that she was losing her friends—even her father. Her heart sank at the deep silence. The shadow of the lattice lengthened out on the floor. Outside a spray of leaves brushed monotonously against the roof of the verandah. Soon she would be alone, quite alone—face to face with a queer reality—except for Ambrose. The name floated to her in the silence. Ambrose. Perhaps he was on the verandah composing. She crept from the bed, crept out on the verandah. Outside there was nothing but the warm moonlight and the leaves brushing on the roof. She came back, alone with the spectre of Yuan. She shivered and lay deathly still, clutching the bedclothes, while the ghostly moonlight peered in through the lattice, stole in and embraced her like an emanation from his cold, unearthly mind. The spray of leaves swished to and fro on the roof of the verandah.

35

Before making an important decision, which Ambrose presently records, Lychnis suffered several changes of mood of a subtle kind, and she was able under his expert questioning to describe them, to give an account of the happenings in the mental, the emotional, the spiritual sphere—the slight happenings that irresistibly fixed her course.

She woke heavy-eyed. After a long wandering in the hot mists of early morning by the reedy shore of the Lake and among the creeks and cliffs and waterfalls, she came clearly to see herself as isolated. Since the first morning when she had explored the valley with Ambrose and encountered the swans, she alone (Ambrose not for the moment considered) had made progress in experience. The others, she perceived, had all abandoned the experience which they had begun, content to remain on the fringe, to let it go ungrasped, uncomprehended. They had stopped short on the threshold of the valley, on the threshold of a dream. She had entered the dream. To her life was yielding up secrets. She looked back from the dome of an emerald hill and saw the vermilion roof, with its horns and glittering dragons, of the Yellow Emperor's Pavilion, in the crescent of the bamboo grove.

They were all sleeping there, except Ambrose, the recorder of other people's experiences, whose white-clad figure she saw in the far distance down by the Lake. They were sleeping, while she woke and strove with what life was offering to the mind. She would keep them there until she had finished, until the valley and its denizens had no more to give, for it is the privilege of those who wrestle with the stuff of experience that they should sacrifice the others. Looking up, she saw that a great mass of clouds in the east was thrusting its arms about the valley. An encircling wall seemed to shut her off from the nearly forgotten world of Europe. It made it easier not to go back.

Ambrose pictures her standing on the top of her hill like a fluttering flag. Lonely she must have been. It is lonely, he remarks, to be in the advanced posts in the matter of human experience.

36

In the afternoon, lying idle and alone on the verandah, she reflected that she had not spoken to Terence Fitzgerald for a long time. She could not remember that he had looked at her with hate or resentment. He had been aloof, but that was his habit, and it might be that still he was bound to her in spirit, not resenting her actions. So she went to her bedroom, put on a twelfth-century robe of amber with a design of black and red butterflies, sped across the lawn, and slid through the bamboo-forest, that was heavy and dark with summer, to the tiled watch-tower.

She climbed the stairs, peering through little windows that she passed, and came to his blue-tiled room. It was littered with painting apparatus. He sat at the window, in his bard-like, painter's gown, with his hands clasped, looking sadly out over the quivering bamboo grove. When she came in his great eyes filled with fire and his voice rang with joy.

"At last the high gods have told you to come?" Then reproach shadowed his face. "But in that alien dress. This is not Lychnis, not my divine inspiration materialized."

"I have abandoned the other dress," she replied, "for ever."

"For ever!"

"I must look the part I am going to play."

"But we are going back. Lord Sombrewater has decided." He spoke with great earnestness.

"Are we? Not quite yet perhaps." She concealed her meaning, giving him great distress. They sat together in the wide window, on a ledge of pale yellow tiles. The poet eyed her long and dreamily; sometimes (through dreaming) his knee touched hers, or his hand, if he spoke, found it necessary to pat her fingers or her shoulder. The innocence of the poet permitted itself some intimacies. But they woke no thrill in her. She only leaned out and caressed the close ivy, or gazed up at the swifts circling over a group of elms in the midst of the bamboo.

"The dress is alien, but it is enchanting," he said, after a pause. "It falls about you like an amber spell."

"Paint me," she replied. "I came to be painted, as promised."

He obeyed. "I believe it is a spell," he went on. "You are under a spell, woven on you by your Chinese The robe has definitely altered your aura."

"Is that the case? Tell me, has Yuan got an aura?"

"As far as I can discover," said Terence, with the air of making a mysterious confidence, "he has got practically nothing else."

"You mean—no body?"

"No corporal habitation at all—not to speak of. Does that interest you? Is it a point of any importance?"

But she was watching the swifts, and only threw out

an aside : " You must write an article, ' The Influence of Environment on the Aura.' "

" But it is profound, I can tell you—in fact, it is disconcerting. I cannot understand these people. It is all part and parcel of the mysterious, sinister unresponsiveness of the place. I am unhappy here." His grey eyes were mournful. " I sit all day without any illumination, unvisited by any messenger from those mysterious worlds that touch so closely on ours. The astral plane is quite closed to me."

" Something has gone wrong with the trap-door," she ventured, unsympathetically.

" Unvisited by anyone," he added, with meaning. But she was absorbed in the gliding swifts.

" I believe some evil spirit on the Other Side has done this by way of a joke. Those three friends of yours, Lychnis, are elementals, vampires."

" It was you brought us here," she threw out, with her eyes on the sky. " The Peach-blossom People—pink feet, I remember."

" It was to punish me for some error. They have brought me here and blown out the candle of my vision. I cannot contemplate. My harp and my tongue are silent ; my hand is paralysed. And now the word descends on me in the mists of morning that I must arise and go back to Ireland. Everything is so designed and so finished, so dead ; and I find your friends so on top of life, so beyond the capacity to feel the world's sorrow, so smug."

She spoke to the bamboo grove. "And so clean. And everyone is so happy. And inspiration only comes to you when you are in an untidy, poverty stricken, romantic country where the people are superstitious and incompetent. In your Paradise everyone must be Celtic and ridiculous. To be poetical, to have beautiful fancies and run to press with them is diseased. You dress up the cold substance of experience with starry crowns and gauze wings to make it look like fairies. A country should produce either men who can think straight or men who can live hard—especially the first. That is what compels me in a man."

The wild anger that flashed in his eyes died down when she suddenly turned her face.

"There is distress in your eyes, not scorn." His concern became apparent in a disposition to offer her the protection of his bosom.

At that moment, indeed, if Terence wanted Ireland, Lychnis wanted England. Hypnotized by the wheeling of the swifts over the elms, she had seen her home, and the pull at her was agonizing. The elm-clump beyond the sea of bamboo was an island of the familiar in a sea of strangeness. She suffered an intolerable desire for England, for the Georgian house, for the tennis-lawns, the stables, the cornfields. Her nerves stormed for the satisfaction that those old habits could give, and her more complex desire for the undefined satisfaction that she was pursuing in the Peach-blossom Valley all but suffered shipwreck. But she gave no hint of this to the poet. He

was friendly to her, but because he loved her she must put him far away, increasing her isolation. They sat in stillness and silence while the blazing summer sun sank down the afternoon sky and the swifts mounted and swerved and flickered high up over the elms.

37

At evening, when the sky was a flaming garden in the glass of the Lake, Ambrose and Lychnis sat side by side in a punt at a distant part of the shore, quietly fishing. Their punt was moored by two poles. Behind them a wall of reeds; before them the green reflection; a step beyond it the sky mirrored in an abyss. They were fishing for pike, perch and the like.

"Yes, it had been decided to return," he replied to a question, "until Sprot disappeared. It is not known whether he went back to the *Floating Leaf* or whether—— Do you, perhaps, know what has become of him?"

"I haven't a notion." She hooked a gudgeon of suitable size through the appropriate membrane and cast her line. "Until it is known, I suppose, my father will stay on. I mean, he wouldn't desert even Sprot. In any case I do not think he will go back just yet."

Ambrose lifted his eyes for a moment from his float to glance at her—a reed-fairy with amber robe and amber hair, steadily holding her rod with slender hands, frowning at the float that bobbed in the ripples. She was a novice at fishing. It was certainly accurate to describe her as a most lovely young woman. The

meaning of her words would no doubt be given presently. She had clearly brought him here to deliver it.

"They can't bear it any more because Hsiao's death doesn't make any difference to Yuan and Wang. Why, Ambrose?"

"You know why. You have grasped the principle. They cherish the personality, and cannot endure the indifference to personality that Yuan and Wang display."

"Yes," she responded; "I do know. They cannot bear to think that they are of no more importance than a grain of dust, or a slug, or a tomato. What do you think about personality?"

"The strange thing about it is," he pointed out, "that Wang and Yuan, who ignore it, have more of it. It is a strange truth. But we understand—do we not?—that the personality is not their own. They merely contain, as it were, something cosmical, something that streams and emanates from them."

"It has the effect, merely, of personality," she observed. "But it is very fascinating."

"You find it so?"

"My float has gone." It had disappeared in the clouds that seemed to drift under it.

"Don't strike for a few seconds," he put in. "It's pike. They run off with the bait and begin to swallow it afterwards. Now!"

She struck.

"Don't pull," he continued. "Hold gently when you can."

"I feel it," she gasped. "I'm in communication. It's wonderful to feel the weight of something in a world you can't see."

By a method of her own the fish was got into the boat. "It is pike," said Ambrose, "but with improvements of Yuan's."

"Yes, I find Yuan fascinating," she continued, when she had cast her line again.

"You are in love with him?"

"Must you put it in the diary? If he were a figure on a vase . . . if he would behave as such after marriage . . . I don't know if I am in love. That's what I have to find out. I couldn't go away without finding out, could I? I must find out. Nothing else matters, and that is the sole reason why I am making so much trouble—not intellectual curiosity, or friendship, or anything like that, but simply an unanswerable desire to understand what is happening to me. At present it's like this—I can't do without him. I feel I must always be in his presence, watching him, hearing him. Is that love?"

"It is foolish," said Ambrose, "to ask ourselves 'Is she in love?' We have no definition of love. We do not know what it is. This is the only question we need put, in the case before us: 'Is your desire towards him strong enough, and more especially single enough, to decide you to make an experiment with him that would create a situation complex enough to be awkward from the point of view of some of the

parties less intimately, but to an important extent, concerned?'"

"Yes, that is the question we ought to put," she agreed. "The answer is——"

But he was momentarily engaged in pulling a fine red perch of about six pounds out of the water. He landed it, and they bent over the tank, to watch it swimming about in company with her improved pike.

"The answer," she resumed, gazing at his image in the tank, "is that she doesn't know, but she has made up her mind that the only way to find out is to live in conditions similar to those which would obtain if the whole experiment were in hand, and with this object she proposes to accept an invitation extended to her some time back and live on the island for a little while in close company with Wang and Yuan, sharing quarters with two or three of the Chinese girls. Is that the kind of answer you like? The kind of sentence, I should say." They left the tank and went back to their rods. Brown shadows of night were now lurking in the luxuriant summer foliage of the valley.

"At any rate it leaves me clear as to your meaning." He fitted out his hook with a fresh gudgeon. "You intend to pursue your experience, if necessary to the last conclusion?"

"Well—nobody could blame me if I did."

"Nobody could, but plenty would. It is the custom to blame people who put things to the test for themselves."

"You would not blame me?"

"Praise and blame do seem so profoundly irrelevant. Was that a bite? No. It is getting too dark to see. The chief point is that at present you are not sure. You will go near the terrible fruit of knowledge, but will you pluck it?"

"You see inside me, Ambrose. I like it. Yes, there is perhaps something I cannot get over. I don't know if I loathe that, or whether I like it. Perhaps you can tell me which. Or . . . or what it would be like . . . if something would make it . . . easy."

Her speech did not often falter. This little hard grain of knowledge in regard to physical facts she still hesitated to put to the test of experience. The unilluminated fact discomposed her.

"That statement you were to prepare for me . . . ?"

He smiled to himself in the gathering brown darkness. "I am afraid it is not quite ready."

The night fell swiftly at last, faintly lit by a moon still low down among the hills, like a lotus among great brown petals. Both felt the weight of a fish when they went to put away rod and line. Soon all was packed up, and Ambrose rowed the punt slowly away.

"You will put me on the island?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"And tell my father?—explain to him?"

"I will."

"And remain my friend when they all misunderstand and hate me?"

"Why, yes."

"What a darling you are!"

He records that when he put her ashore on the Rock she kissed him and wept. He rowed the punt slowly back through the lanes in the water-lily leaves.

38

Lychnis made her way through its main gates into the walled collection of courtyards and one-storied houses where the relatives of old Wang and Yuan lived. During many days spent on the island she had made acquaintance with numbers of them, and now they gave her an eager welcome, overjoyed that the fair-haired and fairy-like stranger should have accepted their invitation. But her first night, alone with two Chinese girls in the lanterned chamber, was strange. They chattered to her in a speech like the speech of birds ; they rolled themselves up fantastically on their queer beds ; and, kind and affectionate with her as they might be, she lay shaking by herself in the darkness, unutterably alone.

With morning there were many things, apart from the pursuit of her enterprise, to fill her mind. It was amusing to watch her companions plastering their hair down with resin. Other young women came in to assist at her toilet, some dressed, as was more usual among them, in the ordinary costume of a Chinese girl ; others, for the sake of pleasing her, or because it was their custom, in robes copied from the fashions of many centuries. An embarrassing interest was shown in her

affairs. They offered her a quantity of clothes to choose from, and watched her with delighted and confusion-producing comment while she managed the combination she affected of her own soft underclothes with robe and trousers in heliotrope and green. They laughed over her. She pleased them.

After breakfast, when she was introduced to some gentle elder women, she was taken by four or five of her friends to a room with an effect, in the clear morning heat, of pink and pale green and gold. There were elaborate chairs, Chinese books, a chessboard in ebony and amber, a stringed instrument (which later she learnt to play), two or three landscapes on silk, objects in ivory and jade and unknown precious metals. An attempt was made at conversation of an explanatory kind.

The youngest of them—a demure, slender girl, who bent and twisted her body with the grace of a willow in the wind—indicated names, such as Golden Apricot, Blue Lotus, or Scarlet Moth. Then she put a question: "Married?"

"Not married," Lychnis replied.

"Those two married," the child indicated, pointing to an elaborate, indolent beauty, and a girl with a sad, intelligent face. "Hsiao's wives."

Lychnis was shocked. They seemed so young for that hideous painter, and it was tactless of the child to have introduced the subject. The beauty smiled secretly, as if she had some fountain, and no mystical one, of consolation, and the sad one wrung her hands.

It was to be gathered that the reactions of these two young widows were of the human kind, not like those of their extraordinary relatives.

It occurred to Lychnis to ask whether Yuan was married. It came to her that he might have a wife, or two wives. There was an exasperating titter. "Yuan!" Two or three shaped their mouths to his name, producing an effect as if they were astonished, or scandalized, or contemptuous—she could not tell what.

Then the beauty spoke—in English, surprisingly: "Yuan not a man—neither is Wang Li."

"You mean?"

But she would do no more than smile, and Lychnis leaned back on her apple-green cushion, angrily wondering how to find out what she meant. Was it meant that Yuan was a spirit, or ghost? A Yuan that was a ghost might be more agreeable in the capacity of husband. She suddenly felt, among these matter-of-fact and human young women, and there came with it a dismaying sense of unreality, that she must have been dreaming about some porcelain image in a museum or a figure on a scroll.

"Are you sad that Yuan is not a man?" asked the beauty, with quite European cattishness.

"How well you speak English!" Lychnis graciously replied, desirous of friendly relations.

At this also there was a titter, and the demure child explained with readiness and a remarkable virtuosity

in the method of allusion that her lovely cousin had learnt this and more from Quentin.

Lychnis closed her eyes, not caring to learn whether the slender young lady had also learnt at the same knee. Quentin, in his hateful irresponsibility, she savagely reflected, knew no restraints. But how would it be to spend the rest of her life among these twittering golden mice? The sad one, the intelligent one, perhaps she would not lightly permit herself what seemed to Lychnis to require the profound assent of reason and imagination. Yuan might take her away, of course. She suffered a wave of anger that he did not come.

39

YUAN was away in the mountains, and as day after day passed without him Lychnis sank deeper into doubt and misery. Then at last he came back, sought her out, spent all his time with her, and they began to weave their lives into one strand. They spent days and nights in the Flying Dragon, often at great distances from the valley; or sometimes they sought strange experiences among the neighbouring forests and crags; and the summer wore on to its full splendour. Afterwards she gave Ambrose some account of these various experiences, and we choose three or four to illustrate the progress of her relations with Yuan.

She began to be influenced increasingly, it appears, by the silent and deliberate guidance of his mind. He had means of conveying his thoughts to her without speech, and this means he used more and more effectively as their intimacy deepened. One afternoon of serene and golden beauty they were strolling, steeped in this conversation, through a birch-wood among the hills. They came upon three Rishi, or mountain wizards, contemplating the smoke of incense in a green circle under the trees. Behind the Rishi was a porcelain image, shrined among leaves, a thing of infinite stillness. The two friends silently joined the group; Yuan

leant against a birch trunk, chin in hand. Lychnis lay prone. But from time to time she looked round at Yuan, for he seemed to have withdrawn his mind from her, to have plunged himself, without thought for her, in the contemplation of the smoke of incense. And the three Rishi were of the most repulsive ugliness—the first huge and sensual, with a belly that burst through filthy rags, distended ears, and the face of a demon of wrath ; the second small and thin, with the face of a froward newt ; the third deformed in the spine, crab-armed, lascivious and cruel. They took no notice whatever of the newcomers, and sat for so long in a tremendous immobility, like that of the brooding porcelain figure, that the flap of a leaf overhead reverberated through the forest and seemed to echo down long passages in the mind. Their foul and repulsive appearance began to be more incongruous with so profound a stillness ; their ugliness was so clearly not the sign of any present passion that they seemed to grow unreal. They might be about to vanish. She suddenly perceived in their faces the signs of immortal, world-forgetting youth. Then came a solitary message from Yuan, that these were men who had left behind them the passions of the world and given themselves to the experience of reality. "It is the presence of reality," he said to her mind, "that displays the unreality of the outward world." The wrathful one stirred faintly at the passage of thought from mind to mind ; his wrinkled eyelids perceptibly twitched.

Yuan returned to the contemplation, and Lychnis found herself being drawn in—wandering, rather, in a world of fancies on the edge of what was too cold and uncongenial for her to enter. At first the sensations in her body intensified. There was an itch for movement in legs and fingers. She was acutely aware of the thrust of her chin in her hand, the strain of the muscles at waist and abdomen, a fly buzzing in her hair, a pebble under her knee. But a gentle wind played on her calves and head. Discomforts faded. She became aware of the beautiful lines and relations of her body. She relaxed, and the tree-roots on which she was lying seemed to embrace her, to gain contact with her ; the life of the tree gained contact with her life. She turned on her back in the embrace of the birch-tree, and began pondering on the delicate tracery of leaves, swaying and glowing in the peaceful sky. She was in a world of trees—birch, poplar, chestnut and ash ; tall silver trunks, brown twisted trunks, smooth boles, tender shoots, branches carrying a weight of ivy ; green tranquil leaves, broad, flat leaves hanging on long stems, white fluttering leaves like clouds of butterflies ; in a world of pale green and misty substance, and deep green with dark, lucid caves, splashes of golden yellow, blurs of red-brown. There was an imperceptible, infinite rustling, an unseen flitting of birds, sometimes a note ; a tranquil diffused light, and beyond the tree-tops an immense pure well and medium of light, a warm sun-drenched region of inter-stellar space, longed for by

the senses. The roots under her body stretched up to a silver trunk that lifted its weight of foliage into that world of foliage and light, lifting her spirit with it. She was among myriads of leaves, exulting, whispering choirs. It seemed to her that the spirits of those who have loved the light of the sky dwelt in them, tasting the sun and the warm winds, saturated with light, with air, with the unseen medium of life and being. A profound calm, a strength of reposed, victorious soul, pervaded the leaves, a dignity of that which fears neither life nor death, not subject to them. Sometimes a bevy of young leaves fluttered with a gust of angelic laughter, or there was a vast stir of passionless conversation, a communion of those who are beyond passion, reposing in the myriad forest leaves. She felt, certainly, a presence. It was what she had perceived in the hideous faces of the Rishi. A presence that was not a presence ; a presence seen in the structure of beauty, but yet it was not beauty ; she found it also in music, in a formula, in the valley, in the eyes of Yuan, but it was not any of these ; not happiness or unhappiness, not life or death, but pre-existent and yet non-existent—such phrases from Yuan's conversation came to her mind. She turned her gaze to the serene and smiling face of the porcelain figure among the leaves. It was a thing of great stillness. It was inactive, but it seemed charged with activity. " It lives," was her first thought ; and pat came the silent answer from Yuan : " It more than lives. There is more than life." A vista was opened

to her. The presence in the life of the trees, in the not-life of the figure, in the unreal faces of the Rishi, was the same presence—the intangible, the unnameable. She perceived a reality outside thought, unhuman and without the warmth and pleasure of thought, a reality that she could not grasp with mind or senses ; but the experience of it brought joy.

And dimly, only dimly, she felt Yuan beside her in the sea of forest thoughts, leaf thoughts, as if he guided her where she floated. In the apprehension of him, in that realm of experience, there was no distaste. She felt closer to him when her senses were submerged. She was where there are no distinctions of this and that.

Her thoughts were broken into by spoken words. The Rishi were coming to the end of their contemplation, and they returned to the world in a state of unhuman gaiety. There still sounded in them the mirth of the Paradise where they had been.

Their gaiety abruptly came to an end. "There are two imperfect beings in contemplation with us," said the demon of wrath.

"One," added the newt, "is very imperfect, being full of half-thoughts, and even whole thoughts, and long pauses of irrelevant dreaming. Those who have thoughts in their minds should not gather round the smoke of incense."

"The other," contributed the third, "is nearly thoughtless, nearly unconscious ; but he impedes the

flo of reality into himself and among us by some attachment to the passions and desires of men."

"A brother!" piped the newt, with a gurgle of newt-like laughter, "an immortal, has drowned the never ending merriment of the immortals in a draught of red and serious desire!"

Yuan did not change countenance, but he drew her away, and they were followed as they went down the rocky path among the birches by sounds of immense hilarity. This is the life he is destined for by family tradition, reflected Lychnis, and he is to become like these, though not so ugly.

His conversation on the way down was somewhat of that which is more important than desire and life, beside which human pleasure is insignificant. "Those," he said, explaining the point of view of his three acquaintances, "who have once found the satisfaction of non-being desire it, and they shun the things that belong to existence, as, for example, friendship and ove."

That might not be inconvenient, in some circumstances, was the thought that presented itself to her attention. It came forcibly at first, then faded in a myriad quivering forest thoughts, at the heart of which, in a radiation of light and power, through a wisp of the smoke of incense, the image of the porcelain saint eternally smiled. An unearthly smile, it was, without scorn and without pity—a smile that made all human experience seem irrelevant, and all human language conceited.

40

At the height of summer the rains came; the fiery flowers and the fantastic hills were extinguished in a blur of rain, in a steam and smell of rain throughout the valley, in clouds of rain drifting among the crags, arrows of rain slanting across the Lake.

For a day or two Yuan and Lychnis stayed at home, amusing themselves in the laboratories, talking in the library, studying paintings on silk, handling bronzes and porcelain, looking out at the rain. They had plenty to say and do, but the deluge had a voice for Lychnis, and she desired to feel the drench on her body, to be enveloped in the embrace of warm rain. The third day, therefore, they took a punt and a cormorant, and went fishing, with only the protection of a flat umbrella, she in her glass-green silk, he in his hunting costume of russet-brown with a note of crimson. Forthwith they were gasping under the minute insistent drive of the myriad rain arrows. They made their way down the squelching path, among dripping laurels, to the shore.

She laughed. "We are in the power of the rain. It is delicious." And he smiled back, knowing how softly and surely the rain prevails.

"See," he called, "the subject for a picture—Rain

on a Sheet of Water and Ducks swimming under a Willow."

They found their punt, and she remembers the touch of his wet hand as he helped her on board. They pushed off, and the rain fell steadily and softly all about them. The sky was full of grey, swirling veils ; pale, driving gusts swept the leaves and the white lilies. The shore receded, there was a blur of willows in a slant of rain, a glimpse of rock like a grey core of rain, and then they were together in a warm, misty oblivion.

Lychnis put up her face to the soft downpour, taking warm caresses on her eyes, in her mouth. The rain drenched her, soaked into her hair, smoothed the silk robe to her body so that she seemed stripped, blinded her, beat her, knew every part of her, and prevailed. She felt shameless and searching caresses down back and limbs, between her breasts and over her torso, on knees and feet. The rain was possessing her, but the face of the rain that watched her was Yuan's. She held up her mouth to the down-drenching lover, saying, " I adore you."

The voice of Yuan replied, " Water-lily." He was regarding her, she realized, with a keen gaze, more than ordinarily prolonged and remorseless. He held her with his gaze, as if he admitted, now, a special relation between them, and wished her to admit it, too. Close to her, shut in by the changing wall of rain, he seemed big and immediate, like a god, like the rain-god. His

features, his yellow skin, his piercing eyes, the slash of crimson on his brown tunic—sole note of colour in a drifting, grey universe—had a terrifying distinctness. He was very close and real and living, though his life—the life behind his unreadable eyes—was not the life of men. Perhaps because it was not Yuan who looked at her, but the swirling rain, not Yuan, but the voice of the universe who spoke, distaste for his flesh vanished. Yuan was dissolved and received into the body of the rain, and she desired him. Past and future vanished; all else was shut out; there was no earth or heaven—only herself in a space of warm, saturating water, floating on water; herself, a cormorant with a fish, and the god of the universe. In his eyes, deep and unreadable and fascinating like the black lake-water, she was about to drown.

He came towards her. She felt her hands taken. The face, impending, intent, was close to hers. The mouth, a calm flower in the rain, was stretched out to her.

She offered herself to the terror of his mouth and the fierce and shining infinity that looked out of his eyes. There was no person in them, only a stupendous power. Yuan had vanished; what held her was not Yuan. Her own body, her own person, seemed also to dissolve and stream away in the rain. There was a sudden blinding drive, a hurricane embrace of rain, and in the midst of it his small mouth was a spot of fire.

41

Next day they climbed up among the crags in gusty weather, and as evening drew on they were overtaken by a shower. There was a mountain temple by a torrent in the shadow of a rock. They crossed the torrent by a bridge and took shelter.

While Yuan contemplated a bronze image of Kwannon, Lychnis looked out at the crags, the pines, the valley below where the torrent fell booming. Far away was the Lake and the island in a mist of rain. Or sometimes she watched Yuan. She had abandoned everything to him, and waited for what he might be about to command. She was living in the intoxication of what seemed an unending now, and made no conjectures as to what might happen when now ended.

All day their talk had been of the regions where he had taken her with the power of his mind (and where she had followed easily), of tree life, of insect life (a weird region), of chill regions beyond, out of which life takes origin. This seemed to her cold talk for lovers, and she fancied she was ready that it should become warmer.

She called to him: "Yuan."

His voice answered from within: "Lychnis."

"We are like the gods up here. Down there I see the world, where Wang Li is." Her mind did not admit the thought of others on the far side of the Lake.

"Do the gods live for ever, and are they eternally happy?" she asked. Her thoughts were all of an immense duration of happiness in some illimitable space of light, with dim shapes of mountains and pavilions. But a shadow fell across her mind, an annihilating thought of a cessation, of a space of nothing, of her lover wilfully dissolving in emptiness, deliberately ceasing to be.

At her question, a swift, stony chill seemed to pass across his face. "Your question has no relation to reality," he coldly replied.

"I know you think it," she answered. "I see quite well that it is absurd. You have made me understand that life is relative and all that. But it is a queer thought for a woman in love. My brains have all gone, you see, because of it, and I—the I that is the living Lychnis, and this body—clamour to be recognized."

She had not spoken to him or to herself so boldly before, but the thought of what he was always calling the eternal, non-existing Lychnis, with no body for caresses, the Lychnis pre-existent in a state precedent to matter and intelligence and life, was not congenial to her. But was she ready for an alternative? At once her words presented their own meaning clearly to her mind, and she experienced a terror that she chose to find delicious. There he was, tall and brooding,

near her in the gloom of the evening. She was ready to think of herself as having been seized, as captive to the masked, expressionless god.

A gust of wind boomed in the roof of the hut.

"It is chilly here," she said. "Are we going away to-night to the forests in the south, where it is so warm?"

He stood close to her, and her orchid-petal hands lay in his. She divined a formidable debate in his mind, and wished that she could have read the eyes that gazed past her through the window. If he did not take her to the forests. . . . If they stayed here. . . . This might become her bridal chamber. She let the thought take her fully, and in the face of reality looked through the window for an escape. There was only rain and frowning crags and the valley, and perhaps the shadow of a picture of someone far off who could have given her advice. The bridal chamber! She was happy as she was, after all, in a now that might as well be unending, and perhaps, if she was to be possessed by Yuan, it would have to be in the glow of that moment of assent in the rain-world, now somewhat past.

He made no reply to her thoughts. With him it was crisis. He chose the flowering moment of desire to show his contempt for it. Most probably the moments of silence were an eternity of the anguish of renunciation.

"Is anything the matter?" She caught some faint shadow of dismay on the strong mask of his visage. "Are you displeased?"

There was no answer. There had been a change in

Yuan, like the change that comes over a man at the moment of death. Her breath troubled her, and she beat in terror at the gates of his mind. "Oh, Yuan! Yuan! Answer for pity's sake!" But he had closed the gates of his mind against her for ever. She stormed, now, to come in, to be his, to accept the whole sequel of her actions, to accept the experience to which she had given herself in its entirety. But the experience had committed treason against her; she was forsaken of God.

"Oh what has happened? What is the matter?" she pleaded. "Why have you gone cold to me?" But she pleaded with a porcelain idol in a dark mountain temple. Her hands still lay in his like lilies in the hands of an image. She tore them away, and took hold of the window-sill and bowed her head into them and sobbed, until the fear of the universe that had turned mercilessly against her silenced even her sobbing with its formidable cold. Then there was a movement on the still face of the image; the god put out a ray of protection against the terror that threatened to overwhelm her, but he left her without refuge from her grief and dismay. She was to face that, he seemed cruelly to determine, unaided.

After a time he touched her on the shoulder and beckoned her to follow him. She went after him into the twilight garden behind the temple, and there he plucked a peach from a little tree and bade her eat it. "This fruit," he said, "is only for the favoured of God

when they have become fitted to endure deep experiences."

Saying this he walked away, and she followed him across the torrent, homeward through rain that beat her now and loved her no more. He held his face from her. Once, indeed, he turned to her suddenly, and she seemed, almost against credence, to see an expression of suffering. But before it had gained a hold even on her memory it was gone, and he strode on again.

42

The oppressive heat of summer was over, and during the still nights when the lotus fades Lychnis heard the wild geese flying southward. She saw nothing of Yuan for nine days. But entering the summer pavilion among the tree-tops one brilliant night of autumn she found him seated cross-legged on the floor, in a haze of moonlight, ragged, bare-chested, in a rapt meditation. He made no sign of having perceived her. She sat herself down in his neighbourhood and waited, recognizing in the moonlight—ghostly remembrance of summer sunshine she was used to there—details of the bleached, air-swept room. Her eyes were drawn to the space of vast, shimmering sky in the door. A branch of pine thrust across that space, she remembers, and she watched the delicate shadow of the pine-branch swaying slightly on the bare floor, travelling remorselessly like time towards the idol seated by the doorway. He was so still that soon she believed herself to be dreaming.

When at last a voice issued from his profound immobility she felt the assault of terror, as if a phantom had spoken. "There is an imperfect being in contemplation with me," the figure said.

"It is I, Lychnis," she answered meekly.

He seemed scarcely aware of her. He was indeed dead in the body. "An echo reaches me. A voice that spoke once in the world of unreality." His tones were the high, uncertain tones of a spirit. He turned his face, and it was illuminated by an unearthly brilliance. It was like talking with a god enthroned in a ghostly radiance of the night sky, and the floor between them seemed a gulf of interstellar space.

"Here on this lonely earth," she answered, "speaks a mouth you have kissed."

"What do you desire of me?"

"I desire to talk about ourselves and about love." She was suddenly sharp and insistent. One sees her seated on a cushion, her head bent attentively towards him, or hanging somewhat like a child's, and when her head was hanging like that, one learns, it was because she had become aware of a new, surprising element—an element of disrespect.

"Ourselves? Love? Self and love are renounced and forgotten, or if remembered they are the remembered pain of some past life." He spoke like a dreamer in paradise, unwilling to wake.

"That is taking things very seriously," she said, speaking thoughts that astonished her as they came into her mind. "Perhaps, after all, love is not a thing to be taken so seriously." A quiver of pain troubled her as she said it, remembering what delights she had thought to obtain from life and love.

Did he stir in his cave of radiance? "The moment of love is past. It was perfect, and needs no addition. In any sense that is not tedious it lives for ever, and may be continually enjoyed by those who live in the blissful regions of non-being. The personal in love is nothing."

"All the same," she put in, "it is delicious."

"In love," he repeated, "there is one moment that is eternal. As in art there is a moment of perfect balance, which cannot be added to or diminished without ruin, so in love."

"Then," she said, mocking, "I am for promiscuity. The more moments the better."

"But the delights of the lover and the artist," he replied, "if they could be prolonged for ever, would not be worth even a hint of the experience of non-being."

Alongside this verbal exchange, alongside the mockery that had come so unexpectedly to life in her mind, she was hurt with images of days they had spent together. She resumed: "I will not talk mockery. Let us be plain about the issue. We loved. We experienced the beginnings of a perfect life together. You have broken it. You have made a renunciation in accordance with the tradition of your family. You have sacrificed me to attain your queer paradise. I want you to satisfy me that it was right to do so."

He said nothing for a long time. She thought that he might reply with questions: whether they had

indeed loved; whether their life together would have remained perfect; whether, indeed, there had not been already a hesitation on her part. Then he spoke:

"The supreme experience of the senses is the renunciation of love."

This did not seem to her an answer. She still waited, and soon he spoke again, looking steadily out through the doorway into the space of moonlight. His face was frozen and pure. "Do you still trouble my peace?"

"I grieve for our beautiful ruined love. I cannot, cannot forget it."

His tones fell now with strange modulations, and there came to her cadences of the flute he played to her in the forest. "The shadow of the pine-branch travels across the floor, reaches my foot, passes over my body, but does not enter me. It is thus with the memory of love. It is thus also with the memory of the world. Around me, when I was a boy, I saw a world of rock and grass and blue sky. Then, when I had meditated on these, and perceived the secret life of water-meadow, torrent and flower, the seen world dissolved. Rock and grass became vaporous like the sky. I saw trees like apparitions, landscapes of shifting smoke, mountains of mist beyond mountains of mist melting endlessly away into an infinite horizon of æther. The world became a contemplation in the smoke of incense. It has gone, and now I meditate on what has taken its place. I am possessed of what is greater than joy. I have come into the calm

of nothingness, into the lightless and ineffable regions of non-being, where there is neither splendour nor darkness. It is an ecstasy. There is no ripple from the created world ; no tremor of the pain or passion of men ; nothing that appertains to the mind of men ; nothing in terms of thought and feeling, of aspiration or regret. The pure lily is no more than the filthy fungus ; the loftiness of mountains and depth of waters are as the flatness and mud of the river-bed. I believe in the unnameable, without shape or substance, infinite and inexpressible ; one in man, plant and inanimate matter ; spirit of spirit, origin of origin, form of form. I believe in the way that cannot be followed, the truth that cannot be taught, the life which is more than life. It does nothing, yet there is nothing which it does not achieve ; creates all things, yet in itself is not ; all worlds and systems of worlds are born in it, yet it cannot be seen or heard ; in its nothingness life and death and all modes of conceivable being reside ; it does not exist, yet it is home to the soul of man. It is ineffable. I therefore renounce the world. I renounce joy and pain ; the vision of spring and the solemn reaping of autumn ; the delight in mountain and tree, in cloudscape, in the fierce tiger, in the flight of wild geese. I renounce the pride of life and the pleasure of the body, and I renounce for ever the memory and taste of love."

The cadences that came like waves out of the moonlit silence ceased. His visage was white and numb. One could not tell if the deep, oblong eyes were seeing or

if they were blind. Did he breathe? Did the bare porcelain chest move? He might have been some hypnotic image, drowning her resentment in sleep.

But the rim of the moon came suddenly into the doorway, making a change, releasing her from a spell. It was intolerable that he should despise the memory of their intimacy, and reject all she had given him of her mind and senses. "Why, why did you kiss me that time?" she asked, in a storm of protest.

"I do not remember," said the calm voice.

Now he seemed immensely foreign and impenetrable, as if she had been in love with a creature. Fiercely she remembered the Jupiter swan that had made love to her that first morning, in a fit of inexplicable desire. Had it been like that with Yuan? No communion of spirit at all? Her ideas about him had been fictions of the mind. The angry desire to be kissed once again by that fiction whose mouth was a spot of fire at once consumed her. She longed in a storm of resentment to wake his senses again, to see those flower-lips crumpled with the fire of passion, to see them grey with the ashes of it. But what art had she to tempt him with? Or, indeed, what art could have equalled the natural beauty of her shape, the fragile and intoxicating bloom and mystery of her person, the troubled loveliness of her mouth, of her eyes? Troubled, certainly, they were, but in them was a gleam of that unstriving and creative energy on which her lover meditated. In those subtle and moving relations between shoulder and breast,

in the ineffable curves of her body, shone openly his uncreated principle from which all order and beauty proceeds.

These, maybe, were his thoughts, and evidently he perceived hers. "That which is accidental in your loveliness has no force with me. Only the eternal has force. The eternal shines in you."

Once again, amazingly, there streamed up in her a fountain of mockery, but the icy reality of his renunciation froze her mockery at her lips. "I believe," she said, hesitating—"I believe that I am more of an adept than Yuan, for I could laugh. I could laugh like old Wang and the Rishi. I am less bound to the world and to passion than Yuan if I can laugh. To renounce is to be bound by the tie of renunciation." But no sign of emotion or any response appeared on his face, and swiftly once more she fell under the hypnotic spell of his stillness. He could not be mocked into life. She had to meet him in the reality in which he rested. "I am a woman," she said. "I see no opposition between your unnameable and my now. Time may surely be made delicious, for the unnameable must be in time, too, and in the usage of love. It certainly is for a woman."

"The supreme experience of the senses," he repeated, "is the renunciation of love. The renunciation is imperfect if it is only made by the one. You have apprehended the bliss that I now experience. I brought it to your spirit, but your own nature made you capable

of receiving it. Your thoughts and desires are not altogether of earth. The earth in you is earth, not of human flesh, but of the narcissus. You have eaten the mystic peach. Why cannot you therefore go all the way with me and renounce your share of what we had in the world ? "

She felt a vague terror. She faltered. " Even the narcissus needs the usage of love."

" Why do you not learn to attain the full ecstasy of contemplation in the heart of the unnameable ? "

" I do not desire to sit here motionless, like a dreaming flower, without texture or colour, and receive in my dream a seed from your dream to beget a dream."

" It is life that is a dream," he corrected. " To dread the unnameable is to be a lost child that dreads to find home."

" Home ! You have found home . . . through me ! " She received illumination. " You brought me here as an excuse for renunciation, as an exercise ; you used me to make your renunciation as difficult, as exquisite, and as notable as you could. And now, perhaps, some shadow of earthly passion makes you urge me to accompany you. I will not. I have a home for my spirit as well. . . ." She broke off, for now terror snatched at her like the cold hand of death. It was the dread that he would paralyse her life and make her sit there for ever in a cold and spiritual trance. There was some unknown and compelling reason why she

should escape ; there was some urgent and unrecognized desire. The satisfaction of her being, she now knew, was elsewhere. With a cry she fled from that bare, moon-swept pavilion, and left the symbol of her experience staring into the moonlight.

43

Ambrose finds it difficult to decide from the recital that Lychnis gave him what was her dominant mood during the following days. There was an element she did not dwell on, but it was important—an element of incredulity, perhaps, at finding her grief supportable. We see her flitting about the woods, driven, in company with the leaves ; the wind was her own bewilderment. Mostly she went with her eyes on the ground. Sometimes, no doubt, she would stamp her foot in anger for the pleasant days Yuan had ruined, and wring her hands out of helplessness. But it seems there were also days of which she tells little—days when she surprisingly lost her trouble in adoration of their splendid heedlessness. That heedlessness was a character of the universe with which she now discovered in herself a surprising affinity.

Of one critical day she told nothing at all until long after, and for some time Ambrose left blank pages in the diary. But one day he was able to fill them in.

All was turning brown in the woods. Not a green leaf of summer. Nothing but early twilight falling over the mountain hut, and sad autumn rain. Yet, oddly, she did not feel a commensurate gloom. The

clouds drove across the sky, now lowering and resentful, now swift and angry, now melting in a vapour of tears, now piling onward high and contemptuous. But her spirit did not answer these changes ; it remained calm ; it derived a satisfaction from the magnificence of the moving cloudscape ; it exulted, even, in the deep and steady passion of the waterfall pouring from the wooded shoulder of a mountain, in the vast tranquillity of the high crags that floated above seas of rain. She stood in the shelter of an overhung rock—a tiny, green-robed figure in the majesty of the mountains—and examined her state of mind. Where was her grief? Washed away on the rain that swept in gusts over the distant Lake. Where was the bundle of moods that made up her troublesome self? Blown away on the winds that tore through the pines, shattered and obliterated like the leaves of summer. Had she any regret for her loneliness? She was incredulous to find that she desired no companion, that she had need of no human being. Had she any fear of the solitude of the mountains? She looked round at the wizard shapes of pine-tree and rock to see if she could frighten herself, and there was nothing in her mind but a strange, sweet, and growing exultation. All alone under the huge overhung crag she laughed her tiny insect laugh—and checked herself, for surely it was absurd that she felt no grief. But there it was, a sensation as if waves out of heaven had flowed into the body that her self, Lychnis, had vacated. Such a thing was preposterous, she decided ;

and pursued her way homeward, resolvedly denying the almost intolerable pleasure that invaded her. She walked with the heavy gait of one who suffers.

Then, fronting her, in a thicket by a glade, she perceived the merry, blanched face of Wang Li, peeping among brown leaves that fluttered and danced on his aged bald head. A wild fawn nuzzled in his hand. He called her, and she approached him with her demure gait of one who is sorrow-stricken, but underneath this dissembling her heart beat like a bird's, for she seemed to be standing within the play of forces that flowed from him. Out of the corner of her eye she stole a glance at the smiling, scant-bearded visage. He was unguessably old, yet younger than the flowers that had been in the glade that April. He was full of a frightening, unhuman wisdom ; on his face there played the wrinkles of a vast laughter. And unmistakably she found in herself something corresponding.

"So Yuan has abandoned you," he said, "and you do not know where to find some relief from your temporary sorrow."

She caught his eye. There were lightnings in it before which her dissembling vanished like silk on hot coals. She broke into peal after peal of laughter, and Wang beat his old head in an ecstasy of merriment. The fawn cropped the grass in complete indifference.

But swiftly she became grave again. "I do not understand myself," she told him.

"It is simple enough."

"All the same, I don't understand why, when I was so dearly in love with Yuan. . . ."

"In love with your left knee!"

"What do you mean then? Was I not in love?" She reflected, almost prepared, now, to believe it. "It is true, there was always a hesitation. But I can explain that."

He doubled up with laughter.

"I really can. There was a difference of flesh between us. He was a foreigner, you see."

The echoes of his laughter drifted to the mountains.

She was a little mortified. "It is insulting of you not to believe me. I only know that I shall never love any man again." Now the deep pleasures of the summer came back to her heart, giving it a twist.

The fountains of Wang's mirth were too much for him. His bleached and shrunken old body could hardly contain the elemental upwelling. The universe itself laughed at her in his old eyes as it had rained in Yuan's. "Let us walk," he gasped; "let us go home." He wiped tears from his cheeks. Then once more the beauty of it overwhelmed him. "She can never love again!" He held his sides.

"Well," she expostulated, "there is nobody. I could not love my father or my old friend Ambrose. The rest bore me. I do not want love. I have this queer new pleasure in me instead."

They scrambled down the valleys, he subject to recurrent fits of amusement. She could not withstand

him, and at last allowed herself to regard Yuan's seriousness and her own bewilderment as a joke. "What has come to me?" she asked the old Sage.

"Death," he answered.

Was this true? She felt as one who recognizes that a tide is about to seize and drown her.

"If not dead, you are dying," he continued. "Did not Yuan give you the mystic peach that shrivels the soul and leaves a house for another inhabitant?"

"But you said I am to love," she protested, displaying an agitation that came uppermost in spite of herself, an agitation that did not really seem to belong to her. "How can I love when I am dead and have no desire?"

"Cannot the immortal take pleasure in love—in compelling lips, in hands that awaken, in . . . ?" In so-and-so and in so-and-so. The old man made her blush with his account of the delights of the senses.

"But you," she interpolated—"you are a Sage . . . you are above desire . . ."

"A Sage is not necessarily a drivelling idiot," he replied. "I am very old. It is more than a hundred years since I was interested in what may interest a younger man, and the immortal indweller has other objects with me. But there was a time . . . The unnameable, when he takes the place of the self, has no objection whatever to making use of the furniture. But he is master of desire."

"But why did I not stay with Yuan and meditate with him for ever?"

"Because you are a woman and have more sense. Oh, the seriousness of these young men! He will get over it, as I did. But he has done his duty."

"But why did he give me the peach?" She had so many questions to ask.

"The immediate occasion was your firmness of heart in following the strange beckonings of the imagination. In consequence you have lost your soul and gained the no-soul. This is immortality. Regard yourself as one of the lucky ones of the world, for infinity now lives in you. Joy and sorrow will be lost in transcending experience. None can withstand the silent and invisible force that possesses you, and nobody can take it away. Accept what has happened to you, young woman. Regard yourself as being dead to the world, and at the same time, when your lover kisses that coral mouth, bite his lip with your little teeth."

They had come to the shore of the Lake, and he took her back to the island in his boat. She gave herself to the tide of immortality that was flowing into her throat, choking the life in her. She had become very serious now, but suddenly he looked up and said: "What fools we are to speak what cannot be spoken, imagining that what we say corresponds with reality!" His ironical laughter rang out over the Lake.

44

Once more Ambrose is sitting with Lychnis on the verandah. It is a warm autumn afternoon, and they are taking pleasure in the sunset glory of aster, dahlia and chrysanthemum that surrounds the Pavilion, and in the golden cloud-rack of leaves that now drifts on the lawn.

She came back, he tells us, so self-possessed, this once moody and relentless fairy. She had a certain calm dignity, unself-conscious and convincing—because, as Wang told her, she had lost her self in what is more authoritative than self; she had opened the way and permitted in herself the play of forces that brook no questioning, at once terrible and lovely.

She was perched on the rail of the verandah, clinging to a post, in a fit of meditation, and sometimes a leaf drifted against her cheek or shoulder.

"I realize now," she said, "how completely I had forgotten you all. I do really think you had passed—all of you—utterly out of my mind. It is surprising. It would have been quite easy never to see you—any of you—again."

"So loosely," remarked Ambrose, "are people bound to one another! It is true—many men might be one's

father, or one's husband. It is a habit formed accidentally."

"I find it odd that my lot should have fallen with just you and the others."

"You do not find it disturbing that human relationships should be so fluid, sentiment so flimsy, and the universe so heedless?"

"I find it beautiful. I should hate the world, now, if it were not all death and change. I have no use for anything that is not inexorable. I like the universe to stare pitilessly—with eyes resembling Yuan's. It is only the cold and the passionless that I can admire. Ambrose, fancy a universe all mushy with love, like an over-ripe pear!"

"Excellent!" Ambrose remembers being conscious of enthusiasm in his voice, more surprisingly of a flush on the flower-texture of her face.

"Yuan helped me to enter the mind of tiger and eagle, to become the tiger and the eagle, and I found in them what I now find in myself, something I can't describe—something immense. I have been a tree, too, you know, and a lotus, and a beetle. What I found in all of them Yuan has now become. He has given himself entirely to the contemplation of it in its nakedness, untransformed into bird, or mountain, or man. I did not want to follow his example, I suppose, because there are things I may find amusing in the world. Wang says that, having found the kingdom of the unnameable, the world has been given to me as well, and

this is in order. But I think I have still just a little farther to go. The peach hasn't quite done its work, and when I'm entirely dead perhaps I shall be like Yuan."

Lord Sombrewater came along the verandah and sat down beside Ambrose. His eye was more pheasant-like than ever. He was glum. Lychnis had given him the outline of her story, and informed him of her willingness to go where he liked, but she had not given him certain information. He could have got it with a question, but he did not care at any time to get his information by direct questioning, and this was a question somewhat difficult to put.

Ambrose replied to her thoughts.

"There are people," he observed, "so securely in alliance with our friend Yuan's unnameable that they do not fear to step down into the world and drink deeply of its pleasures."

"You, too, have tasted——" she began, and relapsed—refused, swiftly, to meet him in a common experience. "There are so many ways of approaching what it is I desire to say," she continued, "and no words for it. But it really doesn't matter. The chief thing is that nothing any longer matters, except the continual experience. One is so at peace."

"The peace of God," Ambrose interjected.

"I suppose one must say 'God.' But there is a great danger of being misunderstood."

"This experience," he observed, "is enjoyed in

various forms by many people, yet it is one experience. The truth is one truth, expressed with modifications due to climatic or other circumstances. It is named after the system of Jesus, or Mithra, or Buddha. There is the Holy Ghost, or the intent contemplation ; the paradise of Nirvana or the Holy City, with tastefully-jewelled gates—a hundred different expressions of the same thing. There is a form of the experience marketed by priests, another by wine-merchants at twelve and sixpence the bottle, and this has the advantage that it augments the national revenue. But whether the experience in itself has anything at all to do with reality, we are not in a position to decide."

"I am glad you can laugh at it," she said, with friendliness. "It is the mark of those elected to salvation that they can laugh at themselves. Those who have known truth laugh a lot—like Wang. I have learnt that."

"You have learnt a great deal, Lychnis." Lord Sombrewater entered the conversation. "Does there remain any region of experience which you have not understood ? "

Ambrose perceived from her enigmatic smile that she understood her father's question. She did not seem willing to give an unequivocal answer. Lord Sombrewater had no hesitation in questioning her intimately before him, and it would have been in accordance with her own relation with him to reply plainly. But she did not answer plainly. He noted that there

had been some change, and wondered whether he should not seek an opportunity to withdraw.

"There is no region of experience that I have not understood," she replied.

"Upon exploration, I presume?" queried Lord Sombrewater.

"It is a question whether a thing that has not been physically experienced can be understood," she murmured.

He turned his head away in swift impatience.

"Hallo! hallo!" A stinging shout travelled to them across the lawn. It was Quentin coming back from an expedition with Fulke Arnott and Ruby. Seeing Lychnis on the verandah, he rushed over the lawn like a bear, leapt the rail, put his arm round her, where she clung to the post, and kissed her full on the lips. Then he drew back and gazed at her, saying reverently: "'The Holy Spirit returns. The morning dew is once more seen on the flowers. The lamp of heaven shines, banishing for ever the dissensions of this little band and, as we hope, the bad temper of our host. If you require a husband, command me——" He paused for her reply, and Lord Sombrewater remained still, shading his face with a plump, capable hand. She shook her head, laughing. "Then I will be your virgin for ever!" he exclaimed.

But she looked at him so that he began to laugh, and laughed until he shook the verandah.

"Tell me," she desired him, "if I answered 'Yes'

or 'No' to a plain question, would you believe that I told truth?"

"I should never listen to what you said," he replied, "but to you speaking. There is no question of believing you. There is that in you, I perceive, that cannot disguise itself with lies. But permit me, once more before I resign the world. We have not seen that autumn gold-brown hair for so many days, those shadows like mauve asters—or are they heliotrope?—those copper lights, those dahlia-red lips, that delicious cavern, those little white teeth . . ." He kissed her again. "And now," prayerfully folding his hands, "to that All which is more than Nothing, that Nothing which is less than Everything." He looked sideways at her.

"You are a restless man," she said, smiling. "You have no peace in you."

Ruby and Fulke Arnott followed on to the verandah, he sheep-faced, she with her radiance a little qualified.

"The wedded pair," Quentin announced—"at least, not yet wedded in time. A marriage has been imagined, let us say, and will shortly be achieved in matter, between—and so forth. Rejecting Achilles, Venus prefers and elevates the chimpanzee. I am envious. I have no morsel."

Fulke glowered, powerless to silence him. He would not look in the direction of Lychnis. Ruby, on the whole, tended to behave as if it did not matter what Lychnis had done, since it was Lychnis who had done

it, and always provided that Lychnis made no attempt to recapture the affections of Fulke. But her impulses were checked by the somewhat cold behaviour of her father, who presently came out on the verandah.

"Good-afternoon, Lychnis," he said. "Back again?"

She smiled at him and said nothing.

"To-morrow we depart, early in the morning." Once more Lord Sombrewater entered the conversation, abruptly. He glanced at his daughter, Ambrose saw, for the effect of his words. She displayed nothing but an infrangible placidity.

"Thank God!" muttered Fulke. "Back to dear, dirty old Europe, with all there is to fight in it. By the tripes of St. Francis——"

"Fulke, dear!" It was Ruby who remonstrated.

"I forgot, darling." He glanced at Lychnis, and went scarlet. "What I mean is, I long sometimes for the good old fight against the forces of capital . . ."

Lychnis laughed out—a laugh of pure, satisfying joyousness. "Fulke—my dear Fulke—you are coming to life too, like Quentin. You are all coming to life again. For I must confess," she explained, "that you had all become a little faded before I went to stay on the Rock. You had lost personality, you know, beside Wang and Yuan."

"By the foul liver of St. Eno . . ." began Fulke. "I'm sorry, my dearest."

"Well I'm blessed!" exclaimed Sir Richard. He looked uncertainly at Sombrewater, bit his lip, and

gravely said his say. "It is reported, Arnold, that there are bandits in the countryside."

"I am disinclined to remain," Sombrewater replied. "We must trust to the name of the Dragon. He owes us that, I think. What do you say, Lychnis? I do not desire to force you to go or to stay."

"Let us go."

"We are at one, then, on this, at any rate." He spoke testily. "You had all better begin to pack."

They departed, except Sir Richard. Lychnis also made as if to go to her room.

"Your room has been changed," Ambrose had to point out.

She turned, puzzled. "By whose orders?"

"At my request, Lychnis," said Sir Richard gravely.

"What does this mean, Richard? I had not been told of this." Lord Sombrewater was sharp.

"I had in mind to save her the inconvenience of the questioning to which Ruby would no doubt subject her."

"This is not at all kindly done, Richard. You say in effect——" His lordship's anger was rising, and then he seemed to realize the weakness of his position and turned on his daughter "For God's sake, Lychnis, tell us—are you my daughter still, or . . . or another man's wife . . . or . . . my God! this hurts me . . . his mistress!"

Ambrose watched the scene with interest. The dusk was gathering. The questions seemed to flap and flutter against the luminous calm of her spirit like

blundering bats. She stood among them smiling a little (though her breast did indeed heave somewhat), and replied: "You compel me to answer a question that seems impertinent. What is it to anyone here what has happened to me while I have been away? But if you place so much importance on the difference between one state and another, and if it hurts you to be kept in suspense, I will tell you—I am a virgin."

There was silence. Then Sir Richard spoke: "I beg your pardon, Lychnis," and went into the Pavilion.

When he was gone, her father hugged her and kissed her on both cheeks. "Thank God, my darling, you are still my daughter! You belong to no other man." He drew back, and looked at her as if to reassure himself. "It is true—quite true—is it not?"

She suffered his kissing and his question, and answered: "Quite true." Then he, too, went into the house; but whether he felt quite sure that he was secure of her love and sole possessor of her, Ambrose doubts.

Lychnis, on her part, looked at Ambrose with a somewhat dubious smile. "In his business affairs my father has much of the calm of Wang Li. He makes use of impersonal forces, and that is why he is pre-eminent. But in his relations with me he is destroyed by desire. It is odd, is it not? They do not realize, they do not mind, that morally I was Yuan's mistress. I was prepared"—she spoke to him with a hesitation that was unusual in their talking together—"I was prepared to be his entirely. I did not shirk that,

Ambrose. It was only accident that I was not. You understand that, don't you?"

"In such cases it is so often accident."

"In such cases. . . . Am I a case?"

Her eyes were the dusk looking at him, the brown autumn night, the velvety secret of interstellar space, the cold and heedless contemplation of God. He feasted on the beauty of it, when she had gone.

45

The last night in the valley was deep and secret and starry, deep blue with a streak of night-changed green where the bamboo grove was, mysterious with secret processes in grove and torrent, blue and starry like a still painting on a screen. Not far from the Pavilion a stream flowed slow and deep through a tunnel of trees and hanging creeper. Ambrose stood by a gleaming gilded bridge, listening to the rhythm of the water, feeling the close, secret life of the foliage. Over against the living wall of the grove he saw cigar-ends moving in irregular paths, fantastic planets in a dense æther. Over the bamboo flickered a myriad superb fire-insects, creation of Yuan's. Beyond the grove burned a million gold stars.

The gurgle of the mysterious river in the darkness was flowing sound, hypnotic rhythm, music streaming out in streaks of some foreign colour through the thick and shifting blue substance of the dark night. After some time, he tells us, he became aware that his strange and peaceful meditation now held a different element—a queer thridding, an insect noise coming from within the grove of bamboo. Of a sudden it rose high and clear, and he remembered that it was Lychnis—Lychnis

with her lute, playing the thoughts and motions of her spirit. "Lily-blossom of the world!" he murmured to the dim lilies that swayed at his feet. "Cold loveliness of being that buds for a moment of time out of the secrecy and darkness of unbeing!" He worshipped at this living monstrance of the body of God.

Then again he listened intently to the queer realities of spirit that she was creating with form and movement in the night. The plectrum that had made a thridding of crickets now made a whispering of the leaves of the bamboo. Next, solid and clear out of her vision, a sound like the patter of pearls raining on a temple of porcelain. With composure and quiet deliberation she made her lute sing the secret life of the valley, strength of giant pine, depth and stillness of the lake, high wind among crags; in it dreamed the exaggerated shapes of Yuan, Hsiao and Wang Li. It was there in the grove she sang. Ambrose gazed, as one gazes with the mind into an experience striving to see what is there, as if he should see her at the heart of the grove in a transfiguration. But there obtruded upon his gaze, now used to the darkness, the figures of the seven Sages, listening in their chairs. Had Richard Frew-Gaff ears, he wondered, to hear her turn the stars and all physical reality into voices of ghosts? Did Blackwood receive some whisper of the truth Wang aimed at him? Quentin listened with limbs stretched out in a rigor of emotion. Terence he dimly perceived with hands wrung between his knees, frowning perhaps on some new, queer beauty.

Sombrewater had bowed his head in his hand—understanding too fully that he had a strange lost girl for a daughter. Fulke and Ruby, no doubt, were making love among the trees, perhaps out on the starry Lake; perhaps they heard and were afraid.

His mind returned to the lute-player in the grove. Now she was making a music that was icy and terrible. Image of pine, lake, and crag became faint and vanishing. There was nothing human in it, but only a loneliness of Himalayan peaks and a coldness of outer space. It was the vision of Yuan. The coldness descended even on the heart of Ambrose as he was floated near upon the edge of extinction. The starry sky, the lawn, the grove, the bright gilded bridge, swam, and there was nothing solid. Suddenly her plectrum tore the strings with a sound like the rending of silk. There was silence, and out of it there grew a divine laughter.

46

Ambrose gave a pull with his paddle and drove his canoe head-on into the grey and misty margin of an islet. He shivered, for the cold of daybreak was still on the water. He had meant to stop here, at the bend of the Lake, and look finally at the valley and the island, to reflect on the march of time, taste for a due moment an emotion nobler than sadness, as the beloved valley and the rich experience of the summer faded from bright now into dim past. But valley and rock had vanished in morning vapour. There was nothing but an islet glimpsed in a sepia mist, a blur of willow, a crag high overhead in the vapour, a dejected heron brooding on one leg in the shallows.

Idle for a moment, he let his craft drift out from the reeds. Even the Lake itself, he reflected, some current in it, was bearing him away towards the river, towards the hidden Dragon Gorge. He dipped a blade, and paddled slowly across the water, past islets of reed and bamboo that stood out of the mist, looking for some place where a lane in the mist might give him a glimpse of the Valley. Once, indeed, there was a rift, a view of what seemed some part of the Rock. He was like a man seeking in his memory for something familiar and forgotten.

Silently over the water came Lychnis in her white dress, paddling alone, looking steadfastly in front of her. Their boats rasped.

"I am sorry," he said quietly. "I did not mean to intercept you."

"It seems to be fated that our paths in life should drift together." She spoke very coldly, and he admitted to himself that something was gone from their relationship. He cleared his mind—opened it to the possible implications of that change. They came to him.

"The mist is lifting," he said, and they both looked back over the islet-studded water. The distant Rock, the shore of the Lake with their own mooring-raft of bamboo, a deep grey blur, came into sight like a dream remembered at morning when sleep cannot be regained.

She turned her head steadily away, and the mists closed again, blotting out lake and islet and crag. A voice came from her. "One had pleasant days there." The blade of her paddle hung, and the voice came from her again: "It is not the same, only remembering."

She sped her canoe, and he watched her become a blot of white and pale brown, vanishing in grey vapour.

47

Under the leadership, once more, of Such-a-one, the homeward journey began. Sprot had been released from imprisonment on the mountain of meditation. The mists lifted soon after they had entered the Gorge of Dragons; the autumn sunshine was warm; violets were to be seen where lawn or grove came down to the water's edge, and a memory of early summer lingered among the sombre brown shadows under and about the cliffs. Lychnis would not let them camp in the creek where they had spent a night when they were journeying the other way. The violets were ghosts, and the autumn song of birds was an echo, for it seems that her firmness of heart had left her when they entered the Gorge.

So they went swiftly on, helped by the seaward current. Lord Sombrewater watched Lychnis with anxiety, and Quentin lay in wait, hoping to catch some advantage out of her reaction. But she shunned everyone, and was a fiend to Ruby, who lay in her boat.

Late at night they came to the mouth of the Gorge and pitched their tents (but not where they had pitched them before) and slept. Ambrose, however, preferred to keep watch for any portent that might appear, and

at dawn, when he was fishing among the reeds at the deep-flowing mouth of the Gorge, Lychnis came to him, sweet with the morning, flushed with despair.

"It has gone," she said flatly. "Gone! What shall I do if I am seduced and deserted by my experience that I loved, Ambrose?"

"Do you consider," he asked, "that you have had the experience of God?"

"Do women have the experience of God unless they are in love?" She laughed a little, twisting her fingers among the reeds. "God? It is not a word that means anything. I only had an experience. I don't know how to describe it, unless you have had it yourself. I had come to see the world, men and trees and mountains, as a varying manifestation of the same substance. I saw that everything was continuous, and the pine and pheasant on the branch were only another form of me. Me, did I say? There was no longer any me. Something else was there, and it gave me joy. It was more wonderful and satisfying than anything I had ever supposed could happen. I felt myself a piece of the universe, no longer in opposition to it, an unhappy little piece of separation. The infinite and inevitable had taken the place of my soul, and now it has left me, and however shall I get it back?"

"Calling this experience, for convenience, the experience of God," he replied, "one can only reply that God is not to be thought of as a common seducer. Believe me, before long the satisfaction you speak of

will again fill your heart. Why, there is no cause for despair. This reaction was to be foreseen!"

Her slender body was enshrined within the radiance of the rising sun in a frame of burning willows; her hair was an aureole of gossamer; but the heart in the midst of her was black. "I cannot feel hope!" she exclaimed. "I think God will forget me. He must have so many friends."

"A thing not really worth saying," he replied.

"You are angry with me." She lifted her face to study him. "You are almost not impersonal."

There was a silence. She would not sit down beside him. It seemed she must say something that desired to be said with the advantage that standing gave her. Or was she about to take flight before it could say itself? There is a disguised desire in her, was his thought—some powerful desire that she does not recognize, yet, for what it is.

"You cannot comfort me," she told him. "My coldness of heart, that made me laugh, has left me, and I am weak enough to be crying for the Valley and the Pavilion, and all those summer days and the deep nights, and — and Yuan. Ambrose — Ambrose——" She seemed on the point of vanishing, but she spoke on: "You are a man of whom I can ask this—the only one. You are calm, passive. You will not mind. You see, your memory is so marvellous, you will never forget one hour of all the weeks we spent there or one thing that was ever said. And you have seen my soul

stripped naked, so that it is wrong I should ever be the bride of another man. I desire you to marry me, so that I can always be near you and look in your mind and be reminded of the Valley, and always possess the days we spent there. Will you, Ambrose?"

She blushed very furiously.

Ambrose sat and looked steadily at his float passing him slowly on the stream. He smiled queerly to himself. Desire has marvellous ways of presenting itself to the mind, he reflected. Then, aloud: "In all this it seems to be assumed that I should be prepared to remain a flawless and in no way troublesome glass in which you could feast your heart on the scenes of the past. I ought to warn you—the assumption, which you perhaps make, that I should be a cold, convenient husband, is unjustified."

She swayed on her feet, and her eyes stared at his unreadable face as if a spear from an unseen hand had smitten her side, and she was at grips with the reluctant secret of death. The delicious cavern of her mouth opened, but no words came. He gave her no help. He met her stare coldly, giving no shadow of a look that might carry the word of love.

"Think that over," he added, and returned to his fishing.

48

Late in the afternoon, three days' journey from the Gorge, they put up for the night at a mountain-village inn. The inn was high and isolated, the innkeeper attentive (obedient to the sign of the Dragon). But he warned them that a band of revolutionary troops was thought to be approaching the neighbourhood, with fire and sword.

"Are they, the festering blackheads?" Fulke's revolutionary sympathies were a little alienated since his engagement to Ruby. "A lot of scrofulous thieves unworthy of the high name of revolutionary. By the giblets of St. Francis's little dog——! I beg pardon, my darling."

"You were going to remark," put in Quentin, "that these do not carry bricks for the New Jerusalem."

The Sages, the two girls, and Ambrose were gathered in the eating-room of the inn, talking, and watching the effect of sunset among the hills. Lychnis alone was silent, turning a matter over and over. Apparently she had recovered her firmness of heart, but not the transcendent experience. She had come to a point where she was indifferent to the past and future. The

green tip of a budding flower of joy was fighting the winter snow and icy wind, the cold death in her mind.

The Sages and Ruby were apprehensive, at the same time somewhat boastful. Ambrose found a great deal to amuse him in their conversation, for, strangely enough, each considered that he alone among all the others had probed the experience of the summer to the bottom. Blackwood, perhaps, was the most jaunty. He did not really quite know where he stood in regard to life, but he fully trusted that he should soon find out, and in the meantime took an extra lump of sugar in coffee. Ambrose surmises that the words of Wang Li had given sanction for the release of impulses too long pent up and not dissipated or re-directed, and in the first capital they came to there would be an expenditure of energy.

Sprot was assertive. "I always said," he pointed out to them, "that you would come round to my point of view. You admit that I was right about . . ." He did not venture to name names.

"A fool," observed Lord Sombrewater, who had no longer any regard to Sprot's feelings—"a fool is a man who knows from birth what it takes others seventy years to find out."

But Sprot was not put out. "I do hope," he continued, "that we are not in real danger here."

"If we are not," observed Frew-Gaff, "it will probably be due to your friends in the Valley."

"I would like to feel certain that we shall see Europe again," put in Blackwood anxiously.

"I trust," said Frew-Gaff, "that the Dragon will fulfil his obligations. I fear, from what the villagers say, that we are in for trouble."

"It would always be possible to go back," said Fulke. "We had a wonderful time there, after all. I for one should be contented to stay there for the rest of my life—now." He looked fondly at his wench, who leaned against his shoulder.

"No," said Blackwood promptly, "do not let us go back—not unless the danger is really considerable."

"Great things are awaiting us in Europe," said Terence. "I feel it. I have seen Europe in a vision, and we are to arrive there safely after this time of exile and cleansing purgatory."

"The Valley would be a very nice place with a decent up-to-date hotel and a golf-course," said Sprot. "I should like to see a little enterprise and capital put into that Valley. Men were made to work, not to think. I shall never forget . . ." He shuddered as he thought of that frightful period of imprisonment with twelve lunatics on the mountain of meditation.

"I have not yet understood," remarked Lord Sombrewater, "what there was to prevent your coming away."

"What there was . . . ! Well, if you were put on a rock surrounded by water, and every time you put your foot in the water to wade across you were sort of shrivelled all up your legs and spine with a frightful

tingling pain, you'd soon know what there was to prevent you coming away."

"Couldn't you jump?"

"Jump? I tried once! Those devils always seemed to know what you were thinking about, night and day, and when I jumped one of them gave me a twitch that sent me in head first. Not till my dying day shall I forget it. I couldn't remember where I was for a week. My God! if I had my way with them!" He went purple at the thought of the indignities to which he had been subjected. "Go back you may," he added, "but you go without George Sprot."

"There are some experiments that I greatly desire to make," added Frew-Gaff. "I believe I can reproduce some things we have seen lately, if I can only grasp one or two principles that baffle me." He kindled his brows.

"That you never will," thought Lychnis. She despised them for having hopes and fears. It was all one to her, she told herself, if she were slain there that night. She was looking out through the window of the inn. Opposite, a toppling jade crag flamed with a faint fire of sunset from beyond the Valley. The scene did not move her greatly, she found. She was calm in face of the once heart-hurting beauty of sunsets. She turned once more to examine her thoughts, all upside down as Ambrose had put them. He sat there with his back to her, but the current of all her moods was toward him.

As the last rays of light departed from the Chinese landscape, stranger here to them than in the Valley, they heard sounds of considerable excitement in the village. They all went out into the street, and presently little crowds of chattering peasants began to pass the inn. The innkeeper came out at Lord Sombrewater's request. Such-a-one had vanished.

"Ask what the trouble is, Lychnis," commanded Lord Sombrewater.

"Refugees," the innkeeper conveyed, standing impassively with his hands hidden in his sleeves.

"What is happening, then?" she asked.

He directed their gaze across the Valley. A young moon had risen over the zigzagging mountain, and there on the precipitous side of it, not half a mile from the inn, were a hundred lights—the camp-fires of the revolutionaries—and on other hills there were other lights.

Even as the Sages were looking at one another, and Ruby and Fulke, in each other's arms, were making appointments for eternity, a flash came from the hillside. The revolutionaries had discharged their field-piece. The shell burst very short. They tried again, with the same effect, and this seemed to put them in a frenzy, for they began a furious cannonade and opened fire with their rifles. But not a shot came over the village, and they slew nothing but the breeze. The villagers, perceiving that the strangers were miraculously protected, sought to share in the working of the charm,

and soon the party was surrounded by a dense crowd of bead-eyed Orientals, chattering in the dark. The flash of guns and a flare in the sky told that the attack was proceeding over a wide front.

Lychnis watched the proceedings with unconcern.

Very soon, perceiving the uselessness of his artillery, the enemy commander changed tactics, and seemed, from the noise that his troops made, about to deliver a hand assault.

"There are perhaps five thousand of them," muttered Sombrewater. "Richard—if we could get the girls away? If you could steal down to the river and get off in the boats?"

"It could be tried," said Sir Richard tentatively. "But it is for you to go, Arnold. . . ."

"Leg it with me," suggested Quentin, prepared to die if his last hours might be amorous.

"I will not leave this spot in any circumstances whatever," Lychnis answered, low and decisively.

Lord Sombrewater was about to speak, but the words perished in his mouth, for at that moment the colossal apparition of a dragon, with eyes like burning topaz, writhed in fearful silence through the Valley and vanished among the hills. The clamour of the attack ceased, and the people of the village prostrated themselves.

"We are rewarded by heaven," said Quentin devoutly, "for the purity of our lives!"

But the attack was forward again. The enemy came on, yelling like pandemonium, and one after another

the flame-beasts came galloping out of the mountains, and where they passed through the attacking forces their trail was blazed with paralysed men.

"This helps," exclaimed Sombrewater, "but they're still swarming up every valley. Do you see them where the flame goes? They're not being held." He sought for his daughter's hand, and she gave it him. She wore the smile of a holy one. It had come to her that there was nothing but a quietness akin to the quietness of space in her heart. The world might crack and she would be calm, for there was now nothing in her subject to death.

It was true that the enemy were not being held, but the mind that was defending the Sages had reserves in hand; indeed, he disposed of the attack in a way that was cynically humorous. In the days when Yuan had taken interest in appearances his interest had been keen and productive. As he had told them, he was able to reproduce appearances and conjure up phenomena. The secret of the toys he had devised for the defence of the Valley had been communicated, in accordance with family tradition, to the engineers, and they, doubtless, were handling the matter at the present time. With great subtlety the fiery dragons were managed so as to force the attack into certain defined areas. They did not kill, except inadvertently, and, once he was used to them, they served to provoke the enemy to defiance, so that he was gradually drawn on. Yet for a long time it seemed to the Sages as if the defence must fail. But

now the dragons were followed by monsters in human form, with blue, scowling faces and tongues of red fire, who floated over the forest. Their robes seemed to blow and flap in the breeze, disclosing the limbs of demons ; shadows of hate lurked on their brows, and their green eyeballs glowed balefully. Each carried a scimitar under his arm, and one of them, by way of preparatory gesture, cynically shaved a forest from the mountain. The revolutionaries were checked, but amid scenes of compulsion and terror their commander forced his way to the village—a big, hideous man—hewing and slaughtering with an immense curved blade.

He was on them, with a dozen followers, before the Sages realized what had happened, and Fulke and Ruby were already in their hands. The commander himself, smiling like a death's head, fixed his eyes on Lychnis and swung his blade. She found herself looking darkness in the face, and there was only one thought in her mind—Ambrose would die too. His existence and hers would disappear in the non-existing. Already from the cold threshold she looked back at the world, and saw it as a bright place where those who had learnt to stare in the face of darkness might command and enjoy desire. Then she saw Ambrose. His eyes were very far away. He, too, was looking in the face of darkness. Or did he not love her then ? For her, now, he suddenly became the darkness, the heedless, the unnameable. It was in him, in him, that her existence was to disappear.

The bandit lifted his curved blade. It swung once, twice, hissing, and she still brooded on her revelation. But Such-a-one appeared at an upper window in the inn with a device in his hand, and at the third death-bringing swing of the blade he dealt with the chemical composition of the bandit in such a way that the characteristics which distinguish the living from the dead suddenly ceased to be present. Thus also with his followers.

The din and yelling were now terrific. Lychnis ran to help Ruby, who had fainted, and tended her while the conflict raged. The angel of annunciation had visited her and her eyes shone, and Ruby, coming to herself, perceived that something had happened to her friend. "Oh, Licky," she exclaimed, "are we dead? For you look like a spirit in heaven."

"Yes," answered Lychnis. "I have died, and I am looking back at the world. I see that I never knew till I died what it was that I wanted."

But Ruby, seeing the battle and hearing the din, was puzzled. "I do not know what you mean," she murmured. "I only feel that you have become different from the living."

"It is true, my dearest—really true." Lychnis smiled at her friend.

A vast blaze of light thrust the reeling hills out into blackness, and they saw a mass of the enemy pallid and paralysed in the ghastly glare. Then Ruby shrieked, for a monstrous flame-demon swung a scythe through

a huge circle of the night, and the men who had been standing huddled before him stood no more. The rest of the attacking horde turned to save themselves while they could. Then, with a hiss and a roar that seemed to blast the forests, fire sprang from every hillside and streamed over the flying forces. The sky became full of burning villages, and the ears were stifled with the streaming of unearthly flames. Stricken phantom hosts scattered in panic terror along the spines of the mountains; crags of burning sulphur toppled down upon them in obliterating thunder; the mountains themselves seemed to collapse upon flying armies of spectres; and of the actual and substantial fugitives who sought among the rocks for some cover from this spectacle there was none whose heart was not squeezed and ruptured by the cold hand of fear.

Our friends watched in silence until the cynical and jocular fireworks came to an end in fitful lightning and muttering thunder. The terror of the Dragon was in their minds. But there were two in whom terror had no place.

49

They did not at once enter the paradise that was now theirs. They did not even speak of it to each other. They pondered the golden future in secret, and only sometimes, by a glance more subtly effective than kisses, acknowledged that their blood ran to the same rhythm. For those who feed their hearts on the substance of eternity there is no haste.

At last, on a spring morning, the *Floating Leaf* lay in Southampton Water. They stood at the rail, the two of them, looking at the bed of smoke-stacks, masts and cranes that flourished in the Hampshire foreshore. It was necessary that something should be said, now that this daily companionship was to end.

He regarded her steadfastly. The corners of her mouth were turned up, and she smiled faintly at the water.

"You are making a fox-face," he observed.

"I was thinking of the Valley."

"Pleasantly?"

"Oh, very pleasantly! But how far away it seems, and how strange the things we all talked about, even the words we used! They would sound comic in this

atmosphere. Was it real, or did we dream it? Or is this unreal, England and these liners and railways?"

"All life is unreal, as you and I know," he answered her. "We accept it, because we must; but sometimes reality is felt. It sticks through, and the world seems queer beside it. You and I have it for always in our hearts."

"That is true," she said, "even if we dreamt, even if we did really for a time live in a landscape on a vase or a silk. But how did it come to you, this experience of unbreakable, calm joy that has come to me?"

"I came by it years back, in war and disaster."

"Why do you and I have it, and not the others?"

"I cannot answer that. It is predestination. There are some that cannot help but be saved."

She touched his hand. "We are in love with one another, are we not, Ambrose?"

He answered, "Yes."

"It took me so long to find out. One could not recognize a happiness that was so wonderful and so close. Why did you not tell me?"

"I did not want to plant love in you. I wanted it to come of necessity, from the centre of your being."

"Did it hurt, when you saw me in love with Yuan?"

He smiled.

"Oh!" she cried, "I love you because you are cold and unmoved and unescapable, like Fate! I love

you because you do not desire me and my beauty is nothing to you. I die and am forgotten in the night of your being. You are death and change itself, the beautiful, pitiless universe in which we are all swallowed and become nothing."

"You also," he answered. "We have eaten the peaches of immortality, you and I, and we are no longer you and I. We have tasted the fruit, the substance of the universe, that is eaten in the endless fields of Nirvana. We are dead, and we can descend into the world like gods, to command and enjoy desire."

"You do desire me?"

"Yes, my flower, my insect."

She was in his arms, face to face with his unswerving regard. What she found in his eyes must have contented her.

"You understand—everything?" He asked to hear her say "Yes."

"Everything."

"And this time there is nothing to get over?—no repugnance?"

Once more she drew up the corners of her mouth, and, "On the contrary," he heard.

He kissed her, and there was that in his embrace to catch away her breath with surprise and joy.

When Lord Sombrewater came along the deck and saw them sitting together he was struck by something new in their attitude. An immense and unexpected possibility presented itself to his mind.

"What's this?" he asked, with his swift, bird-like regard.

Lychnis told him, and he made no attempt to conceal his satisfaction. "Well, really, this is most gratifying! As you must marry—I suppose you must—some day——"

"To-day," she interpolated.

He was somewhat taken aback. "We'll see—we'll see. Time enough. But if it must happen, I'd rather a thousand times it was Ambrose than anyone else in the world. Really, very gratifying—very gratifying—and surprising. You old pike! I shall feel that her husband has not taken her away from me—has not——" He coughed. "A half-share, perhaps—really, not more than a half-share. Why, with Ambrose you'll hardly be married at all." He beamed, and they exchanged a tingling glance. Then, formally, they received his blessing. "God bless you both—a thousand times. You old pike!" Lord Sombrewater blew his nose and, as a second thought, went off to announce the news to the Sages, and, in due course, to his wife.

They sat side by side, and looked at the smooth water and the spring sky, and wondered at the instant and almost intolerable reality of the happiness that was in them.

Ambrose did not forsake his notebooks upon his marriage, but he does not write much about himself or intimately about Lychnis. One sees them, though,

with that infinite serenity in their souls, contemplating the world with instructed affection and containedly giving themselves to the surprises and exquisite pleasures of love.

Lord Sombrewater seems to have regarded the birth of a grandson with mixed feelings. Apparently it was not somehow what he had expected.

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